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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

No. 579.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., November 27, 1889.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. XLV.



OR,

The Master Detective's Master Stroke.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
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"JACK JAVERT," "HERCULES GOLDSBUR,"
"COOL CONRAD," "DANTON," "CAP-
TAIN COBRA," "SUNSHINE
SAM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TWO MYSTERIES.

It was a warm autumn evening on the Bowery. Above Grand street and perhaps below, as well, not a breath of air seemed to be stirring.

In the small second-story front room of a common-place brick building, near the street just named, sat a man whose name and occupation were known and feared by many; but, there was nothing in his looks to instill fear. His face was mild-mannered and cleanly shaven, his nose a little sharp, like the bill of a hawk, his animated eyes rather deep-set and dark, his hair full of gray, and his hands soft and perfect in shape.

"IF YOU MUST KNOW, I ONCE SAW THAT DESIGN ON THE BREAST OF THE MURDERER, LOT LISPENARD," THE LAD ANSWERED.

He stood five feet seven in his stockings, and, despite the sixty years which he had passed, he still possessed the litherness of movement of young manhood.

They called him "Old Cormorant," and we doubt if one person in every hundred who had heard of him knew his true name.

The man was a detective. He had followed the profession for thirty years, was what is called "an old-timer," and the legitimate man-hunters were obliged to confess that he hardly ever failed to get his prey.

Old Cormorant had no connection with the regular police or detective bureaus of the city. He had been an "independent" all his life. He liked to work after his own style, with no one in authority over him, and it may be that this peculiarity contributed to his success.

Of course he got no orders from Mulberry street. It seemed to be a rule of the office there to hamper him as much as possible; but, for all this, some of the best fish came to Old Cormorant's net, and he lost no time in landing them.

On the evening mentioned at the opening of our story, the Shadow of the Bowery was the sole occupant of the little front room, but he was not permitted to remain so long.

The almost noiseless opening of a door at his right admitted a young man of twenty-three. He was good-looking, had dark eyes, like the detective, a frank, open countenance, and a good figure.

A dark mustache dropped over his mouth, and the way in which it was parted told that its possessor had a care to his looks.

Old Cormorant seemed to recognize his visitor by his step, for he addressed the young man without turning his head.

"Glad you've come, Louis," said he. "You haven't brought another mystery, have you?"

"No. It seems to me that two at once ought to be enough."

A smile came to the Sphinx-like face of Old Cormorant.

"Just one apiece, Louis," he replied, glancing up at his companion who stood beside him.

"They're too deep for me," was the quick answer. "I'm not equal to the task. We don't want to fail, you know?"

"But you've been with me six years. You've learned something in that time."

"Yes," confessed the young man; "but—"

"But you don't want to let yourself out yet, eh?"

"That is not it. Both of these cases should be handled by a master. It is rather unfortunate that they have occurred so near together."

Cormorant looked out of the open window and seemed to reflect a moment.

"What do you think, Louis?" he suddenly asked.

"About the crimes?"

"Not exactly that, but, what ought we to do?"

"Then, you are going to make choice of the trails?"

"Perhaps. It is not an easy matter for a hound to run two trails at once."

"That is true. The latest is, though of course you have heard it, that a reward of ten thousand dollars has been offered for the person or persons who killed Lispenard."

The old detective merely inclined his head in a nod.

"For the murderer of Madam Medusa not a dollar has been offered," continued Louis.

Another nod.

"So you see there is a money incentive on the one trail, none on the other."

"Yes, Louis."

"The police and the detectives will exert themselves to solve the Lispenard mystery. You like to play a hand against them sometimes."

The dark eyes of the Bowery Vidocq seemed to get a gleam of eagerness.

"They think the unraveling of the Lispenard skein more fruitful than the solving of the Madam Medusa puzzle eh?" he queried.

"That is just it."

Louis watched his superior as he looked up and out of the window again as though studying some one among the crowds across the street.

"I don't know but that you are right, Louis," said he at last. "You look at it from their standpoint. Now, would it surprise you if I should take the other mystery in hand?"

The young detective started a trifle.

Nothing that Cormorant did surprised him. He had been with him too long for that.

"I decided just before you came in, boy," continued the old shadow. "I shall see what there is in the Hester street affair. A fortune-teller is rarely murdered, and I am curious to know who snapped the thread of Madam Medusa's life. There's no money in the case for me. But the Lispenard Mystery need not go begging, Louis. You may look into that."

"I?" exclaimed the young man.

"Why not?" asked Cormorant. "You're a chip of the old block, they say; and you've done some clever work."

"But they won't want a boy to take hold of the case," protested Louis.

"Who won't?"

"The Lispenards."

"There is but one—the son. The young lady in the house never bore the dead man's name. Besides, you don't have to let him know that you have taken the trail."

"Of course not."

"If you win, the ten thousand belongs to you. It is worth working for in a financial point of view. I've been waiting for something that would test your powers. It is here. Men already call it the Lispenard Mystery. They don't say anything about the other one. I know your trail is three days old already; so much greater will be your victory."

"When shall I begin?" asked Louis.

"Now; or whenever it suits you."

Once more the old detective turned to the window, while Louis, with a parting look, stepped back and changed his coat.

By and by he went out, leaving Cormorant in a sort of reverie in his chair.

"I thought Louis would look at it that way," murmured the veteran shadow. "He will make a good detective after a while—a better one than he is now, I mean. He thought I would be anxious to pit myself against my old antagonists. Ha, ha! I may meet them before I have done with the case. The Lispenard Mystery will put all of them at work. Louis will have his hands full, and that is just what I want. It will be no disgrace to the boy if he fails. He's shrewd enough to win, and, by Jove! I want to see him come out of the contest with flying colors!"

Cormorant emphasized his desire by bringing his hand down heavily upon one of the arms of his chair, and the next moment he was on his feet.

"Two death mysteries at one time make me wish there were two Old Cormorants with one set of brains!" he exclaimed. "My calculation is that Lot Lispenard, the banker, and Madam Medusa, the clairvoyant, departed this life just two hours apart. I've seen them both—Lispenard behind his blooded bays on the boulevards, and Madam Medusa at work. The papers say that the death of the two was almost identically the same. There may be much or nothing in this. I've seen enough of coincidences to know that they are very deceptive. I don't take much stock in them—not at first sight, at any rate. But this isn't work. I want to know who killed the old fortune-teller of Hester street. As Louis thinks, there may be no money in it, but there may be a good deal of satisfaction."

The detective was getting ready to quit his lodgings, when a light and nervous rap sounded at his door.

"Come in," was his response.

A moment later the door opened and a young man, well-dressed and stylish in manner, advanced into the room.

The eyes of the veteran took him in from head to foot.

"Old Cormorant, eh?" queried the caller, at the same time drawing a card from his pocket.

"Old Cormorant at your service."

The extended card was taken and glanced at by the penetrating eyes.

It contained nothing but a name—simply:

LLOYD LISPENARD.

"Of course you know what has occurred?" remarked the young man.

"The papers have informed me."

"I am here to solicit your services," the banker's son and heir went on. "They tell me that you never fail to find your man."

"I don't know," smiled the detective. "Men are sometimes overrated."

"But you are not! I have caused to be published an offer of ten thousand dollars reward for the hand that struck my father down. I intend to run the guilty to earth. I want the best detective material in America on the trail, and that is why I have come to you."

The veteran looked searchingly at the young man for a moment.

"Did you think that a visit to Old Cormorant was necessary to put him on the trail?" he quickly asked.

Lispenard colored.

"You were about to take it, then?" he exclaimed.

"No, I was not. I cannot take up the case which so greatly concerns you."

"I'm sorry," said Lispenard. "I came here with high hopes. Couldn't I prevail—"

"There! let us not try to bargain," interrupted the detective, laying one finger gently on the young man's arm. "I can't take hold of what is already known as the Lispenard Mystery. I was just going out. You are ready, I see," and the two left the room together.

CHAPTER II.

LISA.

Down in the street the two men, Old Cormorant and Lloyd Lispenard, walked side by side several squares.

The son and heir of the dead banker made several attempts to get the famous detective to take the case, but without success.

He even offered to increase the sum to twenty thousand dollars; but Cormorant shook his head.

At length, seeing that his companion could not be moved, Lispenard desisted, and the two parted company.

By this time the street lamps were being lighted.

Old Cormorant had barely left Lispenard when the young man stopped and looked after him.

It was a strange look. Lispenard seemed to see nobody but the old detective; he followed him with his eye until he had passed out of sight, and even then, for half a second, he appeared on the eve of following him.

"I don't know what to make of him!" exclaimed Lloyd, as he turned away with apparent reluctance. "He is a human riddle no one has yet succeeded in guessing; so I'll drop him," which he did to all outward appearances, for he suddenly quickened his gait and vanished.

Unconscious of this brief espionage, Old Cormorant pursued his way toward Hester street.

It could not be told by his look whether he had dismissed Lispenard from his mind or not. He was a "human riddle" to more than the banker's son—one of those people whose face tells nothing.

In due time he came abreast of a house which he seemed to study for a moment before he walked to the door.

It was a plain two-story brick house, much like the one he inhabited in the Bowery. It had five windows in front, and all were, at the time, closely shuttered.

The detective waited half a minute ere his summons was answered; then he was ushered into the house.

"I happen to be here," said the young woman who let him in. "If you had delayed your visit ten minutes, you would have found the house locked."

"Why locked?" asked Cormorant.

"Because I would have been gone."

By this time the Bowery Shadow had studied his companion enough to observe that she was about twenty-four, with a shapely figure, rather good looking, the possessor of keen gray eyes, and that she had a slightly foreign accent.

"I am Lisa," continued the girl, unexpectedly answering one of Cormorant's mental questions. "I used to help Madam Medusa."

"How?"

The girl smiled.

"Maybe it wouldn't be just right for me to tell," she replied, and then she leaned suddenly toward the detective, as if to get a better view of his face, for the light in the room was none of the best. "I'd like to know one thing, if you please. Ain't you a man-hunter?"

"What if I am, Lisa?" was the response.

His words seemed to put the girl on her guard.

"I thought so!" she exclaimed. "I've been wondering why some one of your kind hadn't come sooner."

"Am I the first?"

"The first I have seen; but I haven't been here all the time since."

"Yes, Lisa, I am a man who tries to untangle mysteries," continued Cormorant, with a faint smile.

"Who sent for you?"

"No one."

"They haven't offered any reward, have they?"

"No."

The girl looked puzzled.

That the detective should undertake an intricate, and perhaps clewless case, without a promise of reward, was incomprehensible to her. It excited her wonder.

"I'd have thought that you would have taken the Lispenard case," said Lisa. "From the hand-bills I've seen on the street, there's something in that."

"But I am here, you see," and the detective smiled again. "Will you show me the place?"

Although the girl fully understood the meaning of these words, she gave a sudden start.

"There isn't much to see—not now," was her reply. "She was found up-stairs."

Lisa led the visitor up a flight of rather dark steps, and opening a door at the top, motioned him into the chamber thus displayed.

It was the west front room, and the window, not shuttered, looked out from the end of the house and down into a narrow alley.

"This isn't where Madam Medusa received her callers, as you may know," remarked Lisa; "but, here is where she was found—dead! You've read the papers, of course?"

"I've seen them," answered Cormorant, who was taking in the room with a minuteness of detail which Lisa was to recall before many days had passed. "What are you, Lisa?"

The question, so unexpectedly put and abrupt, made the girl recoil.

"You're not American; that's what I mean."

"Not altogether," stammered Lisa. "My mother was of this people; my father was a French officer in service in Algeria. Did my tongue betray me?"

She smiled as she put the question.

"It gave you away just a little. But, no harm done, I hope. If you have not finished your errand here, you may resume the task."

Lisa seemed glad to get out of the detective's

presence, and, a moment later, she bowed and withdrew.

"Lisa!" muttered Cormorant. "Born in Algiers; so was Madam Medusa. I don't like coincidences at the start."

He went to the unshuttered window, pulled the curtain to one side and lowered the upper sash an inch, for the room was close and had a musty odor.

He was in the apartment where the dead body of the old clairvoyant had been found.

He knew that Lisa (so she had sworn at the inquest), had discovered Madam Medusa dead in her arm-chair, with her head fallen to one side, and a dagger-wound midway between neck and left shoulder, leading downward to the heart.

It was the girl's duty to report to the fortune-teller every morning at six, and thus she had been the first person to discover the crime.

Cormorant took the fatal arm-chair and moved it to a spot near the bed. He was some time adjusting it exactly to his notion, and when he had completed his task, he stepped back and surveyed it with satisfaction.

While thus engaged, he heard a light footfall come pit-a-pat to the open door.

"Curious Lisa!" thought Old Cormorant to himself, without looking up. "She wouldn't be a woman if she didn't come back to see what I am up to."

He heard the footsteps recede as they had come, and by and by they died away altogether.

They did not come back for twenty minutes. Then they approached the door as before, and went away in the same manner.

"I wonder if she learned *that* in Algiers?" thought the detective. "This promises to be an eventful trail. Sneaking footfalls at the beginning! They give excitement to the mystery. Lisa may hear watching; but, Lisa didn't kill Madam Medusa. I'll stake my head on *that*!"

Cormorant seemed to find but little in the room that encouraged him. He looked everywhere, his countenance changed at no time.

The only thing that broke the monotony of the hunt was the pattering footsteps which, of course, belonged to Lisa.

At last the veteran shadower went toward the door with the intention of quitting the room.

"Once more, eh?" he ejaculated as the footfalls again greeted his ears. "I shall catch you this time if you don't look out, Lisa!"

But, at that moment, the door closed by some unseen agency. The lock clicked as it shut.

The Veteran Vidocq stopped nonplused. He forgot, for the moment, that he was in the house of one who had dealt in black art—a woman who had spent years of her life duping her fellow-creatures by the base deceptions and appliances of so-called magic.

His first impulse was to seize the gilded knob of the door, which he did, but, as he touched it the room seemed to fill with a suffocating atmosphere.

He stepped back with a stifled exclamation of surprise.

Denser and denser grew the horrid air, and Cormorant felt his brain in a whirl!

"A death-trap!" he decided. "Lisa did not serve Madam Medusa in vain!"

The evident peril of his situation drove him to the door again. He caught the knob with both hands, suddenly twisted it with all his strength, and pulled back like a Hercules.

The lock yielded, with a crash, the door flew open, and Cormorant rushed headlong into the hall, with the fumes of an unknown and powerful agent on his lungs.

A sense of dizziness took possession of him at the top of the stair.

He clutched the railing with both hands and tried to steady himself.

Now he heard a singular noise like that made by a large animal after a long chase.

He could not tell from which direction the sounds came.

Something seemed to tell him that safety lay only in the fresh air beyond the house.

He started down the steps with the movements of a drunken man, now striking the wall, now bounding against the balustrade.

"It is no use! The fox has found his match!" suddenly rung out a voice from—Old Cormorant knew not where. "The days of the Veteran Vidocq have ended! and no one shall ever find his grave!"

Clutching the railing for support, he heard each word with distinctness.

A bitter laugh, one full of triumph, followed.

The detective knew his senses were leaving him. His hands fell nerveless from the balustrade; he made one more superhuman effort, fell against the wall, and heard the laugh again.

Just then a door opened below, and, as a light flashed up, he saw a figure emerge from a room. It was not Lisa's!

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN AND THE BOAT.

"I won't go straight to my target. I'll see Ixion first."

Thus spoke Louis, the young detective, to himself as he went down the stair leading from Cormorant's lodging in the Bowery.

He realized the full importance of the case to

which he had been assigned. He knew that, in trying to solve the Lispenard mystery, he would have to bring all his skill into play, for detectives of more acumen than he were already in the field, spurred on by the splendid reward which the banker's son had put out.

Who was Ixion?

Louis, after a walk of some minutes, found himself on one of the streets whose lights are, at night, reflected by the waters of the East River.

He was not far from the South Ferry.

He found near the water a certain house to his liking, for he opened the door without knocking and ascended a dark stairway to a back room on the second floor where he disturbed a singular-looking man at an odd occupation.

A lamp, with a shade on one side, which sat on a rickety table before the man's work-bench, which was a board on his knee, threw its light on Louis while it cast the worker in shadow.

This man looked up at Louis's step, and greeted him with a smile.

Imagine a man of perhaps fifty, with a large head on a pair of contracted shoulders, the face covered with a grayish beard of a fortnight's growth, a pair of sharp, restless eyes peeping out over puffed cheeks, and ears too large even for the large head. He would have made a good freak for a dime museum, for, in addition to his other peculiarities of figure, his arms were very long.

This was Ixion.

When Louis entered the room he was engaged in punching a piece of half-transparent paper full of little holes. At first sight, one would have seen no order in his work, but a closer inspection would have revealed the almost completed figure of an eagle bearing a serpent in his mouth.

"At it yet?" said Ixion with a smile, laying aside his awl for a moment. "A Mexican dropped in yesterday and ordered something new."

Ixion was a professor of the tattooing art. His nationality was unknown; but two things were certain: he was not an American, and he had been to sea.

His customers were principally river men and seamen, though sometimes he got jobs which were profound secrets. He made his own designs, and, despite his uncouth looks, his long, dark hands were as tender as a woman's.

Louis took a seat beside Ixion and remained silent for a moment.

"I've got a new job," he said at last.

"Ha! I'm glad of that! And you'll complete it, too!"

The tattooer of New York knew the young man's calling.

"I don't know," answered Louis with a shake of the head. "This is a Herculean task. It is the Lispenard Mystery."

Ixion gave a quick start, a sharp little cry of surprise, and looked strangely at his visitor.

"Where is Old Cormorant?" he asked.

"Off on another trail," smiled Louis. "Don't you think I have my hands full?"

"I do; but, you'll win, mind I tell you!"

"Thank you, Ixion. A fellow can always get encouragement here. You're not much of a prophet of evil."

Ixion, without replying, put aside his knee-board, crossed his legs, and looked at Louis as if making a study of him.

"The Lispenard case, eh?" said he. "The papers have been full of it. He was very rich; one of the blue bloods; had his carriage and horses. He could have bought and sold us ten thousand times, Louis."

Louis nodded acquiescence.

"But they have their Nemesis the same as poorer trash. Dives doesn't die any better than Lazarus. Ten thousand dollars reward, I see. Put forward by his son. He could have put ninety thousand on top of it; but I guess he's like his sire—a slave to the golden god. I saw Lot Lispenard, now deceased, in a very strange place once—for him. That was here."

"Here?" echoed Louis, almost unconsciously.

"Here—in this room!" said the tattooer. "I would as soon have expected an angel of light. In he walked one night, a little disguised like a man on a secret mission, and exposed his flesh directly above the heart."

"I want that taken off!" said he. "A man who can put things on ought to be able to take them off."

"I looked at him with some amazement. Lot Lispenard in Ixion's shop almost took my breath. I looked at the strange tattoo on his breast—strange, I say, because I had never seen but one like it, and I've seen a good many odd ones in my time. It was an arrow-pierced heart dangling from a gibbet; and, in many respects, the best piece of tattoo work I had ever seen."

"But, you had seen such a tattoo before, you say?" queried Louis, who nearly forgot the mission that had brought him to Ixion's.

"Once before," answered the tattooer. "You know what I profess to do in my line? I can't make the flesh as nice as it was before, but I generally satisfy the customer. I went to work on Lispenard's tattoo. He came back four times, always at night. If you have read the papers closely since the murder, you know that

my work was well done. The expert surgeons who examined the body make no mention of a tattoo mark ever having been on the breast."

"I noticed the report. You are right, Ixion."

"So far as Lot Lispenard is concerned, he carried, as he thought, the secret of the gibbeted heart to his grave. We never met after his last visit."

"What about the other tattoo, Ixion?" queried Louis.

"It wasn't in this country," said the old man. "I don't care to talk about it now. Some other time, Louis. Lispenard knew the man who wore it. I never saw him but four times. There was a gulf between us just as there was between Ixion and Lispenard. Dagged in his own house, eh? Swift, sudden! No clew, and you are in the case."

"Yes, in it to stay," answered Louis.

"You'll win; mind I tell you!" ejaculated Ixion, using the same words he had used many times before. "But, you didn't come here to-night to hear my jabber about a tattoo mark."

"It has interested me all the same," replied the Veteran Vidocq's pupil. "I came to ask you about the man you tattooed that stormy night six months ago."

The eyes of Ixion suddenly opened wide in surprise.

"Do you think—It's none of my business what you think!" said he. "You are going back six months for a purpose. I want to help you, Louis. There are some secrets which I would not give away—not even to you, boy."

"I don't want them, Ixion."

"Let me see. The man who was here during the storm, eh? I haven't forgotten him. I never forget my customers. You will recollect that I told you he had what we call a Malay's hand?"

"Yes."

"That's just what he had. I've seen lots of them. They were made to handle daggers or cresses, and they often strike downward from behind."

Louis started.

"I know," smiled Ixion. "Lispenard was finished by a downward stroke—a bit of Malay work, likely."

Louis was silent.

"You don't think so? Very well," continued the tattooer. "But, somehow or other, you come back to my six months ago customer. I didn't see his face, you know. It was masked. The arm and hands were pretty much all I saw of him. I'll show you the work if you want to see it."

"I would like to," said Louis.

Ixion turned half-way round on his seat and opened a drawer near by.

After a brief search he produced a tattoo pattern in perforation, and handed it to his visitor.

Louis studied the design a few moments and returned it.

"I put it on his right arm between wrist and elbow," the tattooer remarked. "It didn't take long, for it is a simple piece—nothing but two crossed daggers over a human heart. What else, Louis?"

"Nothing."

Five minutes later Old Cormorant's pupil stood on a pier with the cool night wind that came up from the bay in his face.

He had a good deal to think about. His visit to Ixion, the tattooer, had not been unproductive of results: but he had not found a clew to the Lispenard Mystery; the trail of the Unknown Hand had not been struck.

It was Louis's luck to have halted in the shadow of a pier-post taller than himself.

All at once he caught sight of something dark rising and falling on the surface of the river.

That it was a boat he well knew; but it was not likely to concern him.

In a little while it was lost to sight, but, three minutes later, the head and shoulders of a man came up over the fringe of the pier, within twenty feet of the spot where he stood!

The occupant of the boat was leaving it.

Louis watched these proceedings with breathless interest; he could not have done otherwise.

When the man had gained a footing on the wharf, he stretched himself, and threw a hurried glance around.

Then it was that a strange thrill shot through the young detective.

He knew the man before him; there could be no mistake.

It was the young millionaire, Lloyd Lispenard!

He started off before Louis could recover from his surprise.

Here was another mystery!

In a minute, with every sense alert, he sprang to the trail thus unexpectedly struck, but too late.

Lispenard vanished and was lost!

After a fruitless search for his quarry, Louis turned about and went to the veteran's quarters.

It was midnight now, but he found the lodgings unoccupied.

"Night is day to him," murmured Louis, tak-

possession of a cot in one corner of the room, where, thinking over the adventures of the night, he fell asleep.

Morning came without showing him Cormorant.

By and by he went down upon the street, and carried a morning paper to his breakfast-table.

Opening the sheet, a singular headline met his eye:

"FIRE FOLLOWS DEATH!"

Louis read five lines and then stopped.

He felt that there was no color in his face.

Mother Medusa's house had been destroyed by fire—completely and mysteriously destroyed at that!

CHAPTER IV.

COOL AND CLEVER.

To say the least, the young shadow was both mystified and amazed.

It was some time before he could collect his thoughts sufficiently to finish the brief and startling narrative.

The account stated that the origin of the fire was a mystery; that it was discovered a short time before midnight, and that in a little while the old clairvoyant's den was past saving.

Louis, forgetful of his breakfast, read the account the third time. He did not know what to make of it.

Hastily dispatching the meal which he had hoped to enjoy, he left the table and went back to Old Cormorant's lodgings.

Entering the room, he was surprised to see, seated at the open window, with his face turned toward the street, the well-known figure of the Veteran Vidocq.

"Ah! good-morning, Louis, my boy!" exclaimed Cormorant, without turning his head, for he knew the step.

Louis crossed the room with an eager question on his tongue.

"Do you know—"

"Yes, I know," broke in the elder, leaning back in his chair and looking up at Louis. "The old house went up in fire last night. We've got a cool enemy to fight. The Unknown Hand will stop at nothing. I know that from my experience last night."

"You were there, then?"

"I was at Madam Medusa's den," was the reply. "I never had such an experience before. What did you discover?"

The young detective was burning to know all about Cormorant's adventure, but knowing that it would be best to let the old man have his way, he proceeded to detail a part of his experience—the episode of the pier.

"So it was Mr. Lloyd Lispenard who came from toward the Bay?" ejaculated Cormorant.

"It was the young man. I know him by sight."

"He cleverly evaded you, eh?"

"Yes," confessed Louis. "But I am sure he did not see me."

"Young Lispenard is fond of boats and boating. I happen to know that," pursued the detective.

"Do you think he was merely indulging a fancy last night?" asked Louis.

"What think you, boy?"

"A man would hardly scull on the river at night for the mere pleasure of dipping an oar. Besides, he did not look very tired when he had clambered upon the pier. If he had not given me the slip, I might have had something else to report."

There was a moment of silence and then Cormorant spoke again.

"Do you know Lisa?"

Louis started at the oddity and abruptness of the question.

"Lisa?" he echoed. "Who is Lisa?"

"Lisa is a likely-looking young woman, whose American mother was the wife of a dashing French officer stationed in Algeria. Lisa was born there."

The young detective shook his head.

"Lisa is unknown to me," said he. "You have met her?"

A curious smile appeared at the corners of the veteran's mouth.

"Yes," he answered. "I found her at Madam Medusa's last night. Lisa is cunning. She might be dangerous under certain circumstances. I've taken an interest in her. I wonder if she thinks the fire finished Old Cormorant last night?"

"Finished you?"

"Yes. Magic tried her hand in the fortune-teller's den, and I was the victim."

Seeing the inquisitive expression portrayed on Louis's countenance, Old Cormorant detailed his experience in Madam Medusa's establishment up to the time of the arrival of unconsciousness.

"I fell powerless at the foot of the stair," said he. "I don't know how long I lay there, for one cannot measure time in that state, you know. When I recovered, I was lying in the open yard behind the old house. It seemed that I had a faint recollection of having been dragged from the place, but it was too vague to be tangible. My head still swam with a strange dizziness, but

I managed to get beyond the yard. All at once I saw a jet of fire leap heavenward from where the house seemed to be, then another and another, until the whole structure was in flames. I saw the whole thing burn to the ground despite the efforts put forth to prevent the catastrophe. The destruction was complete. The house of magic is no more. The miracle, Louis, is that I am here; no thanks to the Unknown Hand."

"Do you think that, by the destruction of the house, the person who killed Madam Medusa intended to deprive you of certain clues?" questioned Louis.

"Somebody intended to destroy me—to finish the trailer at the outset," grinned Old Cormorant. "As you will remember, I had fallen in a swoon at the foot of the stairs, asphyxiated by infernal gases, operated by the Unknown Hand."

"With Lisa in the house at the same time?"

There was no reply for a second.

"I say nothing about Lisa," said the old detective at length. "They can't drive me from the trail by such work as was done last night. I guess I'm equal to the emergency."

Cormorant left his chair and drew Louis from before the window.

"You've got a pair of sharp young eyes," said he. "I've seen you use them often to pick out people across the Bowery. Look across the street now; cautiously, boy!"

"What is it?" asked Louis glancing from the window.

"Single out the man across the way who is twirling his cane while he appears to be in no particular hurry."

"I see him!" exclaimed Louis.

"Well, he has passed up and down half a dozen times during the last hour."

"Watching the house, eh?"

"Apparently not particularly engaged," smiled Cormorant.

Louis was eying the designated individual all the time.

"He's dressed like a gentleman," he said, stealing a glance at the veteran detective.

"He's called that in several quarters. A photograph taken even from across the street is sometimes good enough for us."

By this time the man thus observed by the two detectives seemed to have concluded his observations, for he started off rather briskly, and did not come back.

"He's got a hand like a Malay," remarked Old Cormorant.

Louis started. A Malay!

In an instant he thought of the man whose hand Ixion, the tattooer, had spoken of—the masked unknown upon whose arm, six months before, he had tattooed two daggers crossed above a human heart.

"What struck you, Louis?" asked Old Cormorant, whose sharp eyes had observed the start.

"Nothing," answered the young detective. "I always associate a Malayish hand with the creese of that yellow-skinned people. But, will you let me follow him?"

"Certainly. The Lispenard Mystery is your work. But the man will escape you like Lispenard did if you are not agile."

In another moment Louis was beyond the room, and a few bounds carried him to the street. The Bowery was alive despite the earliness of the hour.

Louis crossed the street and started after his man.

In a little while, three squares beyond, he saw the whirling cane and the sleek hat of his prey. Keeping on, he soon obtained a nearer view, though he could not see the face he had followed.

Suddenly the stranger turned and came back. Louis almost stopped.

"A thousand to one that I have found the man Ixion tattooed during the storm!" flashed across his mind. "He looks like Lloyd Lispenard, only his skin is a mite darker than the young man's. One might mistake the two after night. I wonder if I did?"

Louis was recalling the episode of the pier. A serious doubt had been raised in his mind.

Had he mistaken the man now before him for young Lispenard?

The stranger had barely given Louis time to avoid him before they were so near together that they might have touched one another.

The next instant their eyes met, and then the unknown passed on, and the young detective was alone again.

"The same height, the same gait—everything but the color of the skin," murmured Louis. "It is remarkable. I wonder if Lispenard knows he has a double? I don't think he does," and the young shadow found himself following the man he had unexpectedly discovered.

One hour later, Old Cormorant's pupil ascended the stairs to the room where he had left his master.

No one was there.

Louis crossed the floor and pressed a button which he found in the wall.

In another moment he had taken from a small opening, which had been revealed by the pressure on the button, a bit of paper which contained some writing as follows:

"I have gone back to the trail. When we meet again we will know something about the Unknown Hand. Don't let the next man slip through your fingers. The solution of the Lispenard Mystery hinges on cunning, fearlessness and promptness. Don't let either desert you for a moment."

"CORMORANT."

Louis, instead of taking possession of this note, wrote across the bottom the words: "I will obey!" and restored it to the little cupboard in the wall.

"Why not?" said the young man to himself. "I can get a view of the ground in no better way, and Old Cormorant will sanction the move when he hears of it, I'm sure."

Louis made a new toilet and went out.

Not long afterward he ascended the steps of the Lispenard mansion and was met at the door by a good-looking maid in a French cap.

Yes, young Mr. Lispenard was in.

While Louis waited in the hall for a report from the card which he had handed the maid, he heard an exclamation of: "Another detective, for the world!" and as he turned his head to catch, if possible, a glimpse of the speaker, he heard the rustle of a dress.

But he saw no one, and all at once his speculations were cut short by an invitation to step into the library, which he did.

The magnificent room was rather dark, owing to heavy curtains; but as Louis dropped into one of the inviting chairs, his ears caught the sound of a heavy footfall, and the next second he was brought face to face with Lloyd Lispenard.

"Ah! glad to see you!" said the young millionaire to Louis. "I take from your card that you are a detective. I am willing to give you all the information in my power. There can't be too many bounds on the trail for me. Do you want all I know from the beginning?"

His coolness and cleverness astounded Louis.

CHAPTER V.

ISIS.

We seek another part of New York.

We leave Louis in Lispenard's presence, and take the reader across the threshold of a house we have not entered before.

There are scores of houses like it on the fashionable avenues of the great city. It is not unlike some of its neighbors, with its carved door, its gray stone front and its general appearance.

It is No. 1212 —th avenue; not far from one of the pretty squares that dot New York—a play-ground for hundreds of children this hot fall day.

In a sumptuous chair with velvet-covered arms reclines a woman whose face would attract attention anywhere. She is alone in the cool and darkened parlor which does not hide her strange but fascinating beauty, and, while she lies back in the depths of the chair, keeping the air astir with a fan, her eyes are half-closed, and her appearance is one of mingled rest and satisfaction.

In the neighborhood she is known as Mrs. Isis Grahame, the young widow of an English officer, a woman with as much wealth as beauty at her command.

She says, when she is made to confess, that she has just turned her twenty-fifth year, though possibly she has reached a maturer age.

Isis Grahame knows a good deal about India.

She spent a year in a garrison town there with her husband, and, that she was not idle all the time, a set of tiger-claws secured by her own rifle speak for her from the marble mantel.

It is time to light the gas; but the English widow seems to make no note of time.

All at once the door leading into the hall begins to open.

The movement is very slow, scarcely perceptible at first; but each second adds a little to the gap.

Isis, who has heard the slight noise made by the portal, looks toward it with a faint smile.

"I am not asleep, Deeje. Come in," she says in silvery tones, whereupon the door is flung open and a young girl bounds into the room.

In another moment the airy creature is at the widow's side, bending over her with a dark face and darker eyes that seemed to glow and snap.

Deeje is an Indian girl. There is no mistaking the figure, no disguising of the plaited hair, the soft, dark hands; the peculiar skin.

Suddenly, as if repelled, Deeje falls back and looks at Isis.

"We weren't shut up in India, mistress!" exclaimed the girl. "We had the sounds from the jungle, the roar of the man-eater; we went at night to the sacred river; we—"

"Hush!" commands Isis, lifting her hands.

"We are not in India now."

"No," answers the girl with rising bitterness. "We breathe the close atmosphere of a great, strange city. You seem happy here, and when you are so Deeje should not complain."

"Then why do you murmur? Do you want to go back?"

"Not without my mistress."

"We will go sometime, perhaps, Deeje."

"Back to the land of Brahma?"

"Yes."

The Indian girl for a second seems about to

spring forward to embrace Isis, but she keeps her place on the carpet, and contents herself with eying her mistress.

"What did he say when you saw him, Deeje?" suddenly asks Isis.

"He said he would come?"

"When?"

"At the appointed hour."

Isis takes a lady's watch from her belt and consults it anxiously.

She has not returned it to its place ere the bell in the halls tinkles musically, and the Indian girl vanishes.

Isis now turns her attention to the door with more anxiety than before.

Deeje, after opening it to admit a man to whom she bows while her black eyes seem to get a new gleam, bounds up the wide steps in the hall to halt at the top, from whence she looks down among the shadows below.

There is something striking in the picture of the little Indian girl eying, hawk-like, the man who is hanging his hat on the rock and twisting the ends of his mustache—a hasty toilet preparatory to entering Isis' presence.

Her lips seem to lose color, and her eyes get a menacing flash while she watches him as if she hates him for some reason.

She bends over the balustrade to see him enter the parlor; she sees the door close behind him, and then she draws away, like a disappointed cobra of her native land and disappears beyond the landing.

"Am I on time?" asks the man as he presents himself to Isis.

"To the minute almost. I was afraid the girl would not find you."

"Deeje has sharp eyes and the patience of a martyr," was the response.

"I taught her the one; she always had the other," smiled Isis.

Mrs. Isis Grahame's caller was a splendid-looking personage, a man still young, with a fine figure and a handsome face, darker than the average ones to be seen on the streets of New York every day.

"How goes the game?" abruptly continued the woman.

"Pretty well."

"Is the hound at fault?"

"All the hounds are," was the answer.

"That is good!"

"You don't make any mistake."

"I can't afford to," was the rejoinder. "You were not seen last night?"

"S-en?" repeated the man. "I didn't intend that I should be seen."

"You have not rowed for a long time. How did your hands stand it?"

"They are as tough as leather," and Isis's caller laughed lightly as he tried to show his hands in the dim light that prevailed.

"What makes the girl dislike me?" he asked.

"Deeje?"

"Deeje."

"I don't know that she does."

"She watches me like a hawk. When I came in she ran up-stairs and leaned over the balustrade where she thought I could not see her and—heavens! how she eyed me!"

"Deeje is a strange creature," said Isis.

"Strange? I should say so!" half-growled the man. "Do you let her into your secrets?"

"I have told you no."

"That will do. I'd want her a thousand miles from mine."

Then the voice of the occupants of the parlor dropped to a lower key, and more than an hour passed.

Once or twice there came to the top of the stairs in the hall the gliding form of Deeje, the Indian girl. She would lean over the carved wood and listen intently a few moments while she watched the parlor door.

Once she crept half-way down the steps and played the game of eavesdropper; but without satisfactory results.

By and by the door opened and Isis's caller came out, followed by the fascinating widow.

Deeje was not seen by the eyes that hastily glanced upward, but she was there just the same, as dark as the shadows themselves, with her sharp eyes riveted on her mistress's visitor, and her hands shut.

"He must be watched," said Isis. "If he gives us trouble, you know what is to be done. The girl is pliable. She belongs to me as much as Deeje does. Remember! not a single mesh of the net must be broken!"

"I won't forget!" was the response. "The next time don't send your dark-eyed tigress out after me. I don't want her velvet footsteps following me."

"What! do you fear Deeje?"

"I don't like her!" snapped the man. "I've seen too many of her infernal race. I was half-strangled once by one of her kind. Please don't send her after me any more."

"It shall not be done; but it is clear that you don't know Deeje."

The man gave his mustache a fierce twist and went to the door.

"Don't forget!" admonished Isis. "If he gives us trouble, we must look after him."

"If!" laughed the other, and then, with an exchange of good-nights, the man vanished,

and the handsome woman went back to the parlor.

After awhile Deeje came softly down the stair.

She opened the door with an excess of caution and peeped inside.

Beyond the parlor lay a smaller room separated from it by a heavy arras, rich in embroidery.

Deeje's keen eyes saw a long spear of light beyond the folds.

She crossed the soft parlor carpet on tiptoe; she reached out one of her dark hands, and the curtains parted.

Her eyes seemed to dilate at the sight they saw.

Her mistress, with her back turned toward her, was squeezing over a small glass a darkish ball-like object no larger than a cherry.

Deeje saw, too, that several drops of an almost black liquid had been squeezed from the ball, and while she looked as many more followed them.

At last Isis laid the ball aside, and threw into the glass a powder which seemed to dissolve instantly in the contents already there.

The Indian girl missed none of this.

A minute afterward Isis took from a small drawer in the table at which she sat, a dagger in a sheath of black ivory.

Withdrawing the blade, which had a needle-like point, the woman dipped a feather into the glass, and then applied it to the dagger with the same skill with which a good artist handles his brush.

Deeje watched this operation until it was completed.

She saw the dagger returned to its case and put away.

"I go straight to victory!" exclaimed Isis.

"He would have me believe that Deeje, my maid, is not to be trusted. If I thought so, I'd brush her aside now! Dead lips tell on no one. Dead feet dog no person, indoors or out!"

These words, so vindictively spoken, drove Deeje back, almost colorless, and with a cry of terror forming on her lips.

She crossed the parlor with her brain in a whirl, and rushing up the stairs, fell in a heap at the top in a deathlike swoon!

CHAPTER VI.

OLD CORMORANT'S WOMAN-HUNT.

OLD CORMORANT'S first thought, when he went back to the trail, was to find Lisa.

He was inclined to believe that he owed his rescue from Madam Medusa's house to the young woman whom he had found there on the occasion of his visit.

But, where to look for her was the question.

The old detective knew nothing of Lisa's existence until he found her in the fortune-teller's den. She had confessed that she had played the part of an assistant to Madam Medusa, that she was foreign born, and that she had come to the house for the purpose of removing a few things that belonged to her.

Cormorant thought that Lisa could throw some light upon the mysteries which he had encountered at the house, and that if he could get the girl's confidence, he might strike the trail of the Unknown Hand.

Lisa was in some manner connected with the crime. There was no doubt of this. The girl must be found!

The ruins of Madam Medusa's house afforded no clew.

The papers had not overstated the facts when they said that the Hester street den of magic had been completely wiped out.

The veteran found a lot of people, principally women, looking at the ruins, and exchanging reminiscences of the fortune-teller and her ways.

"The tall, dark-looking girl will have nothing to do now," said one woman to her nearest neighbor.

Cormorant heard the words and listened for more.

"Maybe she'll start up for herself," was the reply. "She came here often enough to learn Madam Medusa's secrets."

"I think madam was too sharp for that."

"The girl looked shrewd, too."

"Who is she?"

"Don't ask me."

"But she used to come to your shop?"

"So she did—when madam sent her."

The conversation flagged, and then suddenly terminated.

Cormorant kept watch of one of the women and followed her into a small store near by, where, when he had entered, he found her ready to sell him anything in her line.

The woman was fat, forty and garrulous.

The detective soon got her upon the important double subject of Madam Medusa and Lisa.

"I never asked the girl her name," declared the shopkeeper. "She would have told me, though, for she wasn't mean in that way. She hadn't been here for a week previous to the murder. I had something for her—a letter which she dropped on my floor the last time she came in."

"A letter?" repeated Old Cormorant.

"Yes."

"You have it still?"

"I've been saving it for her."

The shadower did not want to announce his calling to the woman, but he wanted the letter which Lisa had dropped.

"I have business of importance with Madam Medusa's maid," said he, at the same time taking a bill from his pocket in a nonchalant manner. "I had her address once, but I lost it six months ago. The girl has moved since, and if I could get her present address, I'd be willing to pay liberally for the trouble."

The shopkeeper's eyes had already seen the bill, as Cormorant intended they should.

"Then, it would be doing you a favor by showing you the letter, I suppose?" said she.

"Yes, and it might be helping the girl, besides."

The woman reached up and took from between two jars on a shelf a crumpled envelope which she handed to the detective.

In a moment he read:

"MISS LISA DUBARRE,

"666 R—, street,

"City."

"Aha! she has changed quarters, sure enough!" exclaimed Old Cormorant. "I know where to find her now. Would you mind, madam, if I took Miss Lisa's letter to her in person?"

"Does it really belong to her?" asked the woman.

"Yes; her name is Lisa. By the way, maybe she wouldn't thank me for fetching one of my own letters back to her."

"One of your own?" exclaimed the shopkeeper.

The detective nodded.

"It's half your property, if that's the case," continued the woman. "She wouldn't object, of course."

Cormorant slipped his bill across the counter, saw the shopkeeper's eyes dilate with astonishment while her fingers closed upon it, and the next minute he was on the sidewalk with Lisa's letter in his pocket!

Here was a windfall which he had not expected; but he had not been slow to take advantage of it. Old Cormorant was always prompt.

The post-mark on the envelope told him that it had been received within a fortnight, and he had reasons to congratulate himself upon having found Lisa's abode.

Stepping into a convenient place, he relieved the envelope of its contents and read as follows:

"MY DEAR LISA:—

"Do not fail to keep your eyes open, nor to remember your promise. You need not come to me, but I will see you to-morrow night at your own home."

Isis.

"P. S. Do not forget to treat this letter as you have treated others."

A smile broke over the veteran's face as he read the brief postscript at the bottom. Fortunately for him, Lisa had neglected to comply with the injunction which meant that the letter was to be given to the flames.

With the letter safely housed, the detective started for No. 666 R— street.

It was bare ten minutes' walk from the ruins of Madam Medusa's den, and the thought of finding Lisa there served to quicken the shadow's steps.

"It seems to me that I've met with the name 'Isis' before now," thought Cormorant. "It's not common enough for one to entirely forget it when once heard. But I can't place it now. Lisa will have to help me if she will; but the girl may prove shrewder than I think, though I give her credit for cunning. She should have made ashes of the dropped letter, ha, ha! That is your blunder, Lisa!"

Cormorant's quick steps soon brought him to R— street, and within a square of No. 666.

In another minute he was looking at a plain, three-story brick house, but that which commanded his attention more than anything else was a board hanging beside the door with the legend:

"ROOM FOR RENT."

There were numerous announcements of the same kind in the neighborhood, but that one should hang alongside the door of No. 666 seemed a circumstance which the detective did not like.

However, he went up the steps and pulled the bell.

"Is Miss Dubarre in?" he asked of the matronly-looking woman who answered his summons.

"Miss Dubarre is no longer here," was the response. "It is her room that is for rent."

"When did she give it up?"

"Last night."

Cormorant started. He was too late. The bird had flown!

"If you are Miss Dubarre's friend, I'm sorry I can give you no information concerning her whereabouts," continued the woman.

"Did she go suddenly?" he inquired.

"In one sense, yes. She told me a week ago that she was liable to go away rather unexpectedly to herself, and, as she paid me a little extra on that account, I did not murmur. Miss Dubarre was no trouble; one of the best lodgers

I've ever had. I believe she was serving a lady somewhere in the city; but I may be mistaken. You don't want a room yourself, I presume?"

"I might take one if it suited me. I think of changing my present quarters ere long."

"Then, let me show you Miss Dubarre's late quarters."

In hopes of picking up a clew to Lisa's whereabouts, Cormorant allowed himself to be conducted to a cozy room on the third floor, front. It was neatly furnished, and just such a place as he would like to occupy if he were not a man-hunter and the tenant of the Bowery.

While the housekeeper—Mrs. Bamshot she called herself—was extolling the comforts of the room, Cormorant's eyes fell upon a newspaper on the small table near the bed.

He saw, too, that the page containing the column of "Rooms to Let" lay uppermost, and a step nearer revealed a little cross in pencil opposite several of the advertisements.

The detective, while listening to Mrs. Bamshot, picked up the paper with apparent carelessness, and, as he turned to go out, saying that he would call again in a day or so, he quietly pocketed the find.

A speedy investigation showed that some one, probably Lisa herself, had marked several places that offered furnished rooms, with the intention of securing new quarters.

As the paper was several days old, and as Lisa had left Mrs. Bamshot but the night before, had she not found a place to her liking, and was she not comfortably fixed there now?

Cormorant was encouraged.

There was still a good chance of finding Lisa Dubarre, and he went away from Mrs. Bamshot's with the intention of seeking the marked places in search of her.

"Too much hinges on finding the girl to let the trail get cold now!" exclaimed the detective. "I'll find Isis if necessary when I have unearthed Lisa. When I have found her, I'll have the first link in the chain of evidence against the Unknown Hand. I wonder how Louis is getting along with the Lisperard Mystery? I'm doing pretty well." And Old Cormorant smiled to himself as he pursued his way.

The first place visited yielded nothing.

The advertised room had been taken up by a young gentleman.

The second house still had the sign out alongside the door.

He was informed that a young lady had called and looked at the room, but that it did not suit her.

"I've got one other chance," muttered the detective, moving away.

Five minutes afterward, as he turned into a certain street, he saw a female figure emerge from a house and stand undecided for a moment on the steps.

There was something about the person that instantly attracted Cormorant.

Beyond doubt he had found Lisa!

Although his hunt for the girl had let the afternoon slip away and it was now dusk again, he was certain that he was not mistaken, and when the woman on the steps came down and started off, he followed with renewed hope.

She led him a long chase, disdaining to take a car, as if fearing recognition by some one; and when she had taken a settee in the darkest nook of a little park, Cormorant stole forward and touched her lightly.

"Lisa?" he said.

There was a quick start, a hurriedly upturned face, and then a sharp cry.

"How did you find me?" exclaimed the girl.

CHAPTER VII.

CORMORANT'S MATCH.

No wonder Lisa started, for she beheld gazing down upon her the triumphant eyes of the Veteran Vidocq!

The girl did not try to get away from the hand which had fallen upon her shoulder. She seemed to know that the slightest movement on her part would fasten upon her a clutch from which there could be no escape.

Without replying to her startled question, the detective came around the end of the iron settee and took a seat beside her.

"I think I ought to thank you, Lisa," said he quietly.

"Thank me?" echoed the French girl. "What have I done?"

"Come! You have not forgotten. It was but last night. I found myself in the backyard when I came to. It was not long before the old den went up in flame."

She understood him now if she had not before.

"Well," said Lisa, "I didn't want to see you go with the house."

Cormorant could not help smiling at the reply.

The girl had admitted that he owed his life to her; but that was not enough. The detective had no notion of letting her stop there.

"Why didn't you warn me?" he asked.

"I?"

"Yes, before the suffocating fumes began to overpower me. I heard you come several times to the door of Madam Medusa's chamber—"

"No, you did not hear me!" broke in Lisa, emphatically. "After I left you in the room

where they found the body, I did not come back."

Cormorant saw by her look that she was telling the truth.

"Then," said he, "it must have been the other woman."

Lisa started.

He expected her to ask "Who?" but she did not.

"Won't you let me go?" asked she, suddenly laying her hand on his arm. "I can't help you any. Indeed, sir, you must not ask me about these things."

He had it on his tongue to say sternly: "You must tell me, Lisa!" but his look softened and he replied:

"You know, but you don't want to tell. You want the guilty to go unpunished. Don't you know that silence may injure you?"

"It cannot!" exclaimed Lisa. "You are a detective. If I still refuse to tell you anything, if you find you can not make a traitress out of me, you will threaten. I don't want an enemy. I don't want to be dogged by a human bloodhound; but there are some things you cannot get from me."

The girl's firmness made the detective veteran admire her.

The blood of a soldier was in her veins. She could fight him with weapons of his own choosing.

"It was a cold-blooded murder, Lisa," he said, at length.

"I don't know," answered the girl, half-doggedly.

"The hand that struck in the little room of the clairvoyant's den shall not always remain unknown!"

"That is your work, not mine."

"You left your old lodgings last night."

"Yes; I wanted a change."

"You have been serving two mistresses."

"How, two?"

"Madam Medusa for one, and she of the Unknown Hand for the other."

Lisa's work was now a strange stare.

"We need not quarrel here," she suddenly exclaimed, shaking off the detective's hand, which had all this time rested on her shoulder. "I am going on my way."

She spoke her last words in an independent manner which also said: "You may follow me if you wish, but beware!" And then, slowly quitting the seat, she stood before Cormorant, her figure drawn to its true stature, and her demeanor provokingly calm.

"The coolest enigma I ever saw," mentally exclaimed the old shadower. "It will take some sly work to get around Lisa. She holds in her power the secret of the Unknown Hand, yet, knowing what I am, she saved me from the death-net in Madam Medusa's den."

Lisa gave Cormorant a farewell look, and started off.

Once he thought of drawing forth the letter he had obtained of the female shopkeeper, but, knowing how cool she could be, and that she was prepared for anything, he did not touch it, but said "Good-night," and let her go.

The veteran did not show the chagrin he felt over the result of his hunt for Lisa Dubarre.

He seemed to look after her vanishing figure like a man in a maze.

"By heavens! she must not escape me," he cried, leaping up and taking after her. "I've never been baffled by a woman, and I've dealt with many in my time. You are one of the coolest, Lisa, but I'll give you special attention."

The French girl was still in sight, and Cormorant, with watchful eyes and agile step, soon shortened the space between them.

He followed her home, back to the new lodgings she had taken. He saw her walk up the steps and throw a hasty look around before she opened the door.

Did she see him?

No; it could not be!

For several hours the shadower watched the house for Lisa's reappearance, but she did not come forth.

At last he turned away and left the girl to herself.

"It's like picking up a link and losing it again," muttered Cormorant. "I've made some headway; not much, but some." He smiled to himself. "Only I feel that a woman has been too much for me. What would Louis have done if he had been confronted by Lisa's coolness?"

Half an hour later the little second-story room of the Bowery held its old tenant.

Cormorant, with the front curtain down, sat at the table with the letter before him.

"A woman wrote this to Lisa," said he. "The paper is of the best, made to order, I think, and the writer has education and refinement. 'Isis' is not a common name. It is not American. A child born in Egypt might be called Isis. Let me see. I have something here. By the merest chance I have thought of it. But, it may yield me nothing."

He crossed the room and pulled aside a curtain which hung across one corner.

By this action he revealed a shelf of books, one of which he took down and carried back to the table.

It was a leather-backed volume, thin and

worn, the product, probably, of a second-hand book-stall.

Cormorant did not glance at the title page, which bore the words: "The History and Significance of Names;" but ran over the leaves until he found the name "Isis" at the top of a page.

Then, for the next five minutes he appeared to be immersed in the text before him. He eagerly devoured every word.

"Just as I thought!" said he, aloud. "Isis is Egyptian. She was the sister and spouse of Osiris. No person born out of Egypt would be apt to bear the name. Ha! here's a foot-note. What does it say?"

He read:

"A well-known Englishman, a member of one of the aristocratic families, was presented with twins while sojourning in Egypt. He named them Isis and Osiris."

Cormorant looked up with a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"That's not bad!" cried he. "I've picked a good deal of information out of that little book since it came into my hands. Is the 'Isis' mentioned there the 'Isis' of Lisa's letter? The trail takes a new start. I'm off again!"

And, sure enough, three minutes later, the old man of the Bowery was hurrying along that thoroughfare as if obliged to reach a certain place within a given time.

He went back to the vicinity of Lisa's house.

"An hour here won't do any harm," said he. "In that time the French girl may come or go."

He stationed himself once more against a tree a few yards from the door, taking care to adapt himself to the shadow it threw, and then began his second vigil. He had mentally given himself an hour for the duty.

It was a quiet street, and the hour was still.

He could hear footfalls on the pavement some time before their owners reached him.

By and by, in the middle of the last quarter of his allotted time, a front door opened, and Cormorant saw Lisa once more!

The girl came forth cautiously and took in the whole neighborhood with a look which seemed to see everything.

The veteran detective was as motionless as the tree itself.

Apparently satisfied with her inspection, Lisa came down the steps and started off, toward the Park again.

Cormorant followed.

"Does this mean Isis?" he asked himself. "The girl should have waited until morning. I would not have been here then."

It was all the shadower could do to keep Lisa in sight, and, at the same time, prevent her from catching the sound of his footsteps.

She struck the square at the same point she had touched once before that night.

As she approached the settee a figure arose and advanced toward her.

Cormorant saw the form of a man, and, the next moment, he noticed the two meet under the trees.

"An engagement, eh?" ejaculated the detective. "Coming this way, too!"

He stepped to the trunk of the nearest tree and became a statue there. Lisa and the man came toward him. He caught their tones, but they were low and indistinguishable until they were within three feet of him, when he heard the French girl say:

"I won't be dogged! There are places where one is not hunted like a wild beast. I'll go there and take my secrets with me."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!" cried Lisa's companion. "Don't you know that there's a gold-mine at the bottom of the well? These trail-hounds stand no chance in this game—none whatever!—Isis and I are more than a match for the best of them," and the two passed on, followed by the sharp eyes of Old Cormorant.

Isis! He had heard the name again!

"Pshaw! let the girl go for the present!" he exclaimed. "The man, who is the same person Louis and I saw twirling his cane on the Bowery, knows Isis, and he will sooner or later go to her."

He followed the couple until they separated. He saw Lisa go toward her lodgings, and then he started after the man.

He dogged him to the East River wharves, saw him climb nimbly over a pier and drop into a boat which he seemed to know awaited him there; and, the next moment, he was watching the handsome unknown rowing toward the hundred thousand lights of Brooklyn.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING REPORT.

It was useless to think of following the man whom he had shadowed to the river; and, after watching his quarry out of sight, Cormorant slowly withdrew.

"Does Isis live across the river?" he asked himself. "Is the Unknown Hand over there among the lamps of Brooklyn?"

The Veteran Vidocq seemed to shake his head over the puzzle.

But, one thing was certain. If he had lost the strange man, he knew where to look for Lisa.

If Cormorant could have followed his last

quarry without being discovered, he would have been treated to a surprise.

It was not long before the boat came back. It glided up to the pier it had left a few minutes before, and its occupant climbed upon the landing precisely as Louis had seen a man do the night before.

He looked very much like Lloyd Lispenard. Old Cormorant had been struck by the resemblance. The two men were of the same build, only the stranger had a mite the darker face; but, for all this, stand them side by side under a gas-lamp, and it would be difficult for the young millionaire's nearest friend to pick him out.

The stranger's face had a look of triumph when he left the boat and started off toward the houses. He had just played a game of some sort.

Did he know that the Bowery Shadower had been on his track?

Not long afterward he reappeared. It was in a small room, evidently not on the ground floor.

"I won't let her run away," he exclaimed. "She's too useful where she is, and, besides, I may need her one of these days. I wonder who has been dogging her? The police?—the detectives? No, Lisa; you sha'n't slip through my fingers just because a shadow has frightened you."

Cormorant's quarry drew a chair up to a small table and lit a pipe which he took from a convenient drawer.

He had taken off his coat and cast it aside. His hat followed the garment.

In a little while he was busily engaged in filling the room with smoke. He blew it straight out, or sent it curling in rings toward the ceiling. At times his bright black eyes were to be seen through the rifts, and his handsome face beamed with satisfaction.

All at once he put the pipe aside and sprung from the chair.

He crossed the room and took a lot of letters from a strong and somewhat old-fashioned trunk that filled one corner.

These letters were all in one package and were tied with a string.

He brought them to the table where he untied the string and let the letters fall out before him.

If the reader could have looked over his shoulder he might have discovered that they were all addressed to one person—"Morillo Nantes." Several had the prefix of "Captain," and the large majority were addressed to Havana, and bore American postmarks.

Another thing about the letters was peculiar. The addresses were all in one handwriting—a woman's hand at that, delicate but firm, and in the blackest of inks.

The man fumbled among the letters until he found one which seemed to please him above all others.

He relieved the envelope of its contents and opened the sheet.

Then, for the next minute, he eagerly devoured the writing before him, and for a second longer seemed to regard the signature at the bottom.

It consisted of one word—a name.

It was "Isis!"

Captain Nantes—we may call him by this name henceforward—appeared to read the brief letter two or three times.

He put it away at last, picked out another, and subjected it to the same ceremony. The rest he did not read.

"By Jove! if it wasn't for that Indian girl, I'd feel at ease!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I don't see why Isis keeps her about. She's got tiger blood in her veins, and tiger cunning in her nature. She looks like the woman who once, in the suburbs of Benares, sprung out from among the shadows of a ruined temple and had me by the throat before I could think of a tigris. It may have been her mother, and the girl, Deeje—Heavens! if I thought that, I'd get her to dog me some night. I'd throw around her a net as cunning as any she can weave, and all at once I'd settle forever the game she wants to play. She thought I didn't see her hanging over the balustrade among the shadows. She don't know all about Captain Nantes and his eyes. Ever since I was attacked in Benares I've been on the lookout. All women are dangerous, but these Indian witches are not to be trusted."

Captain Nantes retied the letters and put them away.

"Something ought to come out by this time," he murmured, halting in the center of the room. "They've discovered nothing yet. I think the bomb ought to be exploded. I've done my share."

He opened a door on his right and ushered himself into a still smaller room where there was a bed.

Immediately he began to disrobe, and it was not long before the sound of regular breathing told that Captain Nantes was asleep.

At this time there was a light in Old Cormorant's little front room.

The detective was not alone. Louis had just dropped in, and the old Bowery Shadower was curiously watching the almost ashen face of his pupil.

"You've discovered something, Louis," said Old Cormorant. "Has a gleam of light broken in upon the Lispenard Mystery?"

"I wish to Heaven I had never taken the trail!" was the answer. "I am between Satan and the deep sea. No, not Satan; I don't mean that. If I go on I am sure to wreck the happiness of the gentlest girl in New York."

"Not that bad, I hope," smiled Old Cormorant.

"Ay, and worse!" ejaculated Louis.

"Do you mean Ninon, Lot Lispenard's ward?"

"I mean no one else!"

There was no reply, no request for Louis to unburden himself.

"I went to the Lispenard mansion after I lost the man with the cane on the street," the young man resumed. "Lloyd Lispenard received me courteously in the library; but while I waited for him in the hall I heard a woman's voice exclaim: 'Another detective, for the world!'"

"A woman's?" repeated the old detective.

"Yes. I saw no one when I looked around, but I heard the rustle of a dress. The next moment I was in the library and in Lispenard's presence. He seemed free, ay, eager to tell me everything he knew about his father's murder. He showed me the scene of the crime. He described the discovery with a minuteness calculated to make one's flesh creep. All the time it seemed to me that we were being watched by some one. I could not get the belief out of my head. A pair of unseen eyes were somewhere, and somebody was drinking in Lispenard's story as it fell, word by word, from his lips. I felt that he had told it to a dozen detectives, but, somehow or other, he seemed to be giving it more in detail for my benefit.

"Well, when I was ready to go, Lispenard insisted on going out to a bottle of wine. I could not object. Leaving me in the library, he went up to his room for a change of clothing. Again I felt the spell of the watchful eye—the presence of the unseen spy. All at once I heard again that ominous rustle of a dress, and the following moment a hand dropped upon my shoulder. I would have sprung from my chair, but, light as the hand was, it seemed to hold me down. I turned my head, and found myself looking up into a face which I felt must be Ninon's. The young woman stood beside me with the dignity of a statue cut in marble. Her eyes seemed to pierce me through and through. She was as white as the lace collar at her swan-like throat.

"For the love of heaven! don't follow this trail any further!" she suddenly said. "You can but blight my life by playing man-hunter. I would to God I had never seen the light of day!" and then the hand fell from my shoulder, and, with a look which I see at this moment, Ninon Lispenard, as they call her, disappeared in a manner I cannot describe. There was something ghostly, horrible, about the short interview. She came from—I know not where; she went—I know not whither. I had never seen her before; but I know she must have been Ninon, the dead millionaire's ward. When I heard Lispenard on the stair, I was still under the strange spell of the interview with the young woman. I joined him in the hall and tried to conceal my feelings. I trust I succeeded. I asked him over our wine about Ninon. He gave a quick start, and said that he thought the murder had affected her health—nothing more than this. Now, Captain Cormorant, what would you do?"

"I'd stick to the trail!" was the prompt response.

"After what I saw and heard in the Lispenard mansion?"

"Yes—decidedly!"

"The girl has a secret?"

"Undoubtedly. What do you think it is, Louis?"

"I don't want to speak my thoughts. I may be wrong. I may be doing Ninon a great injustice. I would not do that for the world."

"Neither would I, Louis," said Old Cormorant. "But, a woman must not stand between us and vengeance. I'm dealing just now with a shrewd creature myself. They call her Lisa. By and by I will confront her mistress, the, as yet, unseen and unknown 'Isis.' Ninon Lispenard's secret is this: She knows, or thinks she knows, who killed the millionaire!"

Louis fell back with a start and stared at Old Cormorant.

The Veteran Vidocq had spoken his very thoughts.

"That is what has changed her," he went on. "She is in love with the suspected party. Did she not say: 'If you don't want to blight my life, quit the trail?'"

"Yes."

"And you have come to me ready to obey?"

Louis did not speak, but his face was answer enough.

"I won't have it!" continued Cormorant. "Ninon's secret may not be worth that!" and he snapped his fingers. "Go back to your work. It won't be long before we can work together."

"What do you mean?" cried Louis.

"I mean that ere long our trails will be one!"

CHAPTER IX.

IXION'S SECRET.

THE next day Cormorant made a discovery for which he was not wholly unprepared.

Lisa had moved again.

The shrewd French girl whom he had run down after a good deal of trouble, had disappeared from her new lodgings, on purpose, no doubt, to baffle him.

The shadower could not suppress a smile when he thought of the girl's cleverness.

The lady of the house in which Lisa had taken a room said that her lodger had suddenly decided to vacate, that she had paid her a week's rent in advance, which being the case, she would again hang out the sign: "Room for Rent," and wait for some one else.

Lisa now seemed entirely lost. She had not left the shadow of a clew behind, and Cormorant, not for the first time in his life, felt non-plused.

Louis had gone back to the Lispenard Mystery, somewhat against his will; but he had gone back, all the same.

"Now for a hunt for Isis," decided the veteran. "Let me get a clew to her, whoever she is, and the trail of the Unknown Hand may take a new turn."

It was a short time after dusk that day when an agile figure ran nimbly, for its owner's age, up a flight of rather steep steps and opened the door of a room on the first landing.

The man was Cormorant, and the surprised person, caught in the act of puncturing a piece of paper with the point of an awl, was Ixion, the tattooer of New York.

His look told that he knew the detective.

"Good-night, Master Ixion!" exclaimed Cormorant, slipping forward and dropping, uninvited, into a chair in front of the tattooer's knee-bench. "I don't come here very often, eh?"

"Not very. Let me see—"

"Never mind! I was here, last, six months ago to-morrow night."

Ixion nodded.

"You've done a good deal of strange work since that time," continued the detective.

"A good deal," repeated the big-headed man.

"You make money, Ixion?"

"Some."

"Come; you're getting rich. You mark 'em, and I catch 'em, eh?"

"I guess so."

Cormorant suddenly left the humorous.

"I never come to see you, Ixion, when I don't want a little help," he went on.

"You want it now, then?"

"Perhaps."

"I've only one favor to ask before you start in, Captain Cormorant."

"Well."

"Please respect my secrets."

"Tell me when I tread on them," grinned the detective.

Then the little old man settled back in his chair and looked steadily at Ixion for a few seconds.

"Now look out," suddenly said he, thrusting the tips of three fingers into one of his waistcoat pockets. "Did you ever do anything like that?"

He had produced a bit of paper half as large as his hand, and Ixion was bending forward to see what was on it.

All at once the tattooer fell back with the loss of a little color, and then looked at his visitor.

"What did I tell you?" he exclaimed.

"Onto a secret at the first dash, am I?" answered Cormorant.

A broad grin, which seemed to make Ixion's eyes twinkle, was the answer.

"But you haven't answered me," persisted the detective.

"Yes, I've seen something like that, if that is answer enough," said the tattooer.

Cormorant appeared to study a moment before making the next move.

"If you keep secrets to the balking of justice, Ixion, you're not the man I think you are," said he, slowly. "In my hand is the rough design of a gibbeted heart. You will observe that it is pierced through and through by an arrow. You may be curious as to how it fell into my possession. Let me answer now by saying that I'm on another of my trails."

"Is it the trail of the Lispenard Mystery?" queried Ixion. "I thought Louis, the boy, had that case in hand."

"So he has; but, we don't know how trails cross until we run them. Now, Ixion, are you going to proceed?"

"If you must know, I once saw that design on the breast of the murdered Lot Lispenard, the victim of the avenue mystery."

"How came you to see it?"

"He brought it to me."

"To have it removed?"

"Yes."

"And you relieved him of his burden?"

"I did."

"What do you call it, Ixion?"

The tattooer seemed to hesitate.

"Ha!" exclaimed Cormorant. "You know what it means!"

Ixion could not avoid the eyes that were upon him.

"When you saw this strange device in tattoo on the breast of Lisperard, you knew what he had been," continued the detective. "I'm at the door of another secret, Ixion—one which, perhaps, you have been paid to keep. Did you ever see this gibbeted heart tattooed on any other bosom than that of the murdered Lisperard?"

"I did."

"In this city?"

"Not here."

"Where, then?"

The tattooer left his bench. He stood erect and looked down upon Old Cormorant.

"You have no mercy," said he.

The only reply was a singular gleaming of the eyes that watched him like a hawk's.

"Wait," continued Ixion, crossing the room. "We don't want any listeners here."

He opened the door, which was not locked, and the city shadower, half-turning his head, saw him lean across the threshold. Ixion was looking out into the scanty hall, and as well as he could down the dark steps.

At length he came back looking straight at his visitor.

"He is on the stair!" said he in a whisper.

Cormorant left his chair and took a step toward the door.

"You don't know who he may be!" exclaimed Ixion, touching his arm.

"I don't care to know!" was the reply.

The tattooer watched the detective open the door and lean forward.

He could not see how he searched the staircase step by step, as it were, until he reached the bottom one, just beyond which was the sidewalk, with the light of the street-lamp upon it.

Ixion seemed not to breathe while he eyed the figure of the shadower.

"Nothing there now," said Cormorant, coming back with traces of a smile on his face.

"Then he took the cue from my appearance and left," replied the tattooer.

"What was he like?" queried Old Cormorant.

"I could not see. It looked like a dark heap on the stair."

"A spy, think you, Ixion?"

"What else could it have been?"

The incident did not seem to disturb Cormorant, nor to break the thread of his trail.

He came back to the dropped clew with a certainty that startled Ixion.

"Well, what does the gibbeted heart mean?" he suddenly asked.

"It is the sign of an Order," was the answer.

"Not an American one, Ixion?"

"No."

"Where did it originate?"

"In India."

"In the Land of Vishnu and Brahma, eh?"

"Yes."

"Who were, or are—there may be some living yet—entitled to wear the device?"

"The Order of the Coiled Cobra originated in Calcutta. It was formed one night in the dark recesses of one of the half-ruined temples of the Indian city. It sprang from the brain of a woman."

"A woman at the bottom of every case!" exclaimed the veteran.

"Certain I am that a woman formed the Order of the Coiled Cobra," was the reply.

"It was not a native league, then?"

"On the contrary, not a native was admitted. Men and women belonged to it. All bore the tattooed sign alike—the women on the right arm, the men on the breast."

"What was the object of the strange Order?" questioned Cormorant.

"What! Do you think I know everything? See! I don't carry the device over my heart!"

And Ixion, opening his clothes, exposed his breast to the detective's gaze. "I never felt the needle of my art in my flesh."

"Nevertheless, Ixion, you know why the Order of the Coiled Cobra was formed."

"Accursed fortune forced the knowledge upon me," was the reply. "I could not help it. It was formed to kill the English Viceroy, to steal the store of jewels in one of the treasure temples of India, and, finally, if still undiscovered, to poison the waters of the sacred river of the land."

Cormorant did not speak for a moment.

"Well, what was the outcome?" he asked.

"There was a traitor. The League disappeared like snow in the face of the sun. There are thousands who cannot be made to believe that the terrible scheme ever had an existence, save in the wildest fancy."

"What became of the Queen of the League?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Was death the penalty attached to treason?"

"It was death!"

"How many emblems of the Order have you ever seen?"

"Two."

"One on Lisperard?"

"Yes."

"And the other—"

"The other on an unknown man whose mark I took away on a ship anchored off Malta."

"Ixion, did you ever see the Queen of the Indian League?"

"I think I saw her once."

"In India?"

"No; on our vessel."

"Whither were you bound at the time?"

"To America. It was my last voyage."

"And you brought her to—"

"New York!" finished the tattooer.

"What was she called then?"

"Her Indian maid called her Isis."

"A thousand thanks," smiled the Veteran Shadower.

"You did get the secret, didn't you?"

"It took a little work, Ixion," laughed Cormorant.

"Do you want to find the Queen of the Calcutta League?"

"I do."

"Hang me! if I'd ever look for her!" exclaimed the tattooer.

"Why not, Ixion?"

"Because that infernal Order, born in mystery and darkness, was organized to kill!"

CHAPTER X.

THE DEEJEH LINK.

"He did not like to surrender, but I got it!" chuckled Cormorant as he descended the stairs after his interview with Ixion, the tattooer. "I did not have to threaten. He knows what I know, and that loosened Ixion's tongue. So the supposed originator of the Coiled Cobra League—its queen, in fact—is a person named Isis? Lisa's friend Isis, eh? And she came to New York, in a ship that carried Ixion! Sworn in in India, killed in Gotham! That's the way it begins to look to me."

Cormorant seemed to have forgotten the incident of the spy discovered crouched on one of the steps by Ixion. At any rate, he went down to the pavement apparently looking for no one, and when he struck the stones he went away with rapid strides.

"She had an Indian maid with her, Ixion said," he went on to himself. "This woman Isis—the passenger on Ixion's ship—was accompanied by one of Brahma's disciples. It oughtn't to be very difficult to find her."

Not long afterward the Veteran Vidocq dodged into a narrow street and reached a strange looking house whose entire front from roof to basement was cast in heavy shadow.

In response to his ring, one of the dark panels of the door slid aside, and the detective saw a pair of gleaming snake-like eyes that seemed to study him with distrust.

"Neejar?" said Old Cormorant.

Whether the word was a proper password or not, the eyes disappeared and the door opened wide enough to admit the detective's body.

Cormorant found himself in a hallway dimly lighted but not so dimly that he could not see the little dark-skinned figure that stood beside him.

He had been a genuine native of India, a man of perhaps fifty, austere of countenance, straight as a spear, with a shaven and beardless face.

"What is it?" asked the Indian, looking at the detective as if he would read his secret thoughts.

"I want to ask a question or two, Neejar."

"Come."

Cormorant was led from the hall into a room on one side. In the middle stood a fantastic altar of carved ivory. It was adorned with a metallic effigy of Vishnu, one of the three potent divinities of India, and the surroundings told the shadower that he was in a place of worship.

Neejar led his caller past the altar to an oriental seat, and the two sat down.

A lamp, swinging from the ceiling, afforded a subdued light which did not prevent the room from having many dark places.

The Bowery trailer had long known that the few natives of India living in New York had this place where they could worship the deities of their own land. It was not his first visit to "Neejar's Temple," as the house was called. He had once been lucky enough to do its shaven and dark-skinned priest a favor, and on that occasion Old Neejar had pressed his hand, saying that he should not be forgotten.

Cormorant believed that Neejar knew every representative of India, then in New York, and it was this belief which had brought him to the house of mysterious rites.

He did not hesitate long after the priest had led him to the seat.

"How many of your people come here, Neejar?" asked Cormorant.

"Many," answered the Indian, his snaky eyes emitting a singular light.

"Do all in the city come?"

"Yes. They must bow at the shrine of Vishnu."

"You know them all?"

The soft hand of Neejar—soft and dark enough to make the beholder shudder—fell lightly upon Old Cormorant's knee.

"I know them all!" said he. "A child of Vishnu, and we are all his children, does not seek to escape his all-seeing eye."

"But, you have not many female worshipers, eh?"

"Not many."

"Have you one who is a lady's companion?" The priest of Vishnu drew back and looked steadily at Old Cormorant for a moment.

"We have several such," he answered, deliberately.

"When do they come?"

The old fellow thought a moment.

"This is Deeje's night," he said, when he spoke again.

"Deeje? Who is she?"

"What makes my friend so inquisitive?" queried Neejar. "Why does he want to know so much about the children of Vishnu who worship him in the New World? Does he seek her for an evil purpose? What laws has Deeje broken?"

"She has broken none that I know of," exclaimed Old Cormorant, whose calling was known to the priest of the beathen temple. "I don't want to deprive you of one devotee. I won't rob you of Deeje; but by my soul, Neejar! I'd like to see her. Does she come tonight?"

"It is her night," was the response. "But, Deeje may not be the person you want to see."

"Whose maid is she?" asked the detective.

"She serves a woman who was once the wife of one of our oppressors."

"An English woman, ha?"

"The wife of a British officer."

"And her husband—"

"He is dead!"

"A widow, then?"

"A widow."

Cormorant was about to seek further information concerning Deeje's mistress, when Neejar suddenly clutched his wrist and led him into the hall.

"The Gentile is not permitted to see a child of the Vishnu at his devotions," whispered Neejar, at his ear. "Some one has come. It may be Deeje. Go up the steps where the shadows are, and watch and wait."

Cormorant did not need a second bidding. As his wrist was released from the grip of the skeleton fingers, he bounded up the stairs that went to the second story from the hallway, and hugged the wall in a shadow near the top.

He saw Neejar approach the door and manipulate the slide; then the portal was opened and a female figure slipped in.

There was light enough to show Cormorant that Neejar's visitor was tall and well shaped. The face, which was half hidden by a veil, was fully revealed when the door had shut, and he saw the countenance of a woman of India.

Something told him that he was looking down upon Deeje.

Neejar seemed to detain his visitor in the hall for his (Old Cormorant's) inspection.

"She's pretty," said the detective to himself.

"She's got a figure as lithe as that of a young tigress."

From his place on the stair he saw Neejar conduct his caller into the room of the altar; he heard the door shut and then all was as still as death.

For thirty minutes, the time seemed many hours to Cormorant, nothing occurred to break the monotony of his vigil.

At length the door opened and Neejar came forth.

The old priest threw a quick glance up the steps, and then came toward the detective without the slightest noise.

Old Cormorant, full of eagerness, leaned forward to meet him.

"Deeje is going back," said Neejar in a whisper.

"Going home?"

"Yes."

"Then let me out."

The Bowery Shadower went down to the door. It was opened by the Indian, and he slipped out and stood among the shadows.

To follow Deeje home would be to discover Isis! It could not be otherwise.

And to find Isis would mean the picking up of a link in the chain which he had sworn to fasten about the Unknown Hand which had taken the life of Madam Medusa, the fortune-teller!

Old Cormorant did not have to wait long for the reappearance of Neejar's devotee.

He saw the door open, saw a half-veiled figure emerge from the house, and the next moment he was a shadow once more.

The Veteran Vidocq kept his distance. He did not want to place Deeje under suspicion, for, even by the dim light of Neejar's hallway, he had seen that she was a creature of strength and cunning.

Deeje led the shadower a long chase—long because she did not trust herself to the lights of the cars.

She kept in the shadows as much as possible; so did her pursuer.

Suddenly the girl stopped.

She was far from the mysteries of Neejar's abode, and the detective, who had not lost sight of her for a moment, was thinking that she was near her journey's end.

All at once he saw the hand of the Indian girl disappear among the folds of her dark dress. When it came forth again something glittered for half a second and then vanished.

Deeje now stood almost against a building

with her eyes riveted upon a figure a few feet away.

"The man with the cane!" mentally ejaculated Cormorant. "He has come back from across the river. My God! the girl is going to commit murder!"

Captain Nantes came toward Deeje, seemingly entirely unsuspecting of her presence. She seemed a part of the wall itself.

But, though she clutched the hilt of an Indian dagger, the dark girl did not move, and while the captain passed, Cormorant could see that it required all her will power to keep her from springing upon him like a tigress.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FLY IN THE TOILS.

DEEJEH watched Captain Nantes until he had passed from sight.

"A narrow escape, old fellow!" murmured the shadower. "For a minute you were in the shadow of the sharpest dagger in New York. The girl seemed to froth at the mouth. I know her hands itched to send the steel to your heart. She hates you. The next time you may not fare so well. My advice, administered gratis, is, 'Keep an eye on Deeje!'"

By this time the Indian girl, as if dismissing Captain Nantes from her mind, had reached the broad steps of a certain house, and a moment after Old Cormorant saw her let herself in with the aid of a night-key.

"It hasn't been a barren trail!" exclaimed the detective. "Deeje has conducted me to the abode of her mistress, and the chances are that I have found Isis."

For some time he surveyed the house so as to fix its general appearance in his mind. He walked past it before he turned away, and noted the number; then he retraced his steps, but not with the intention of picking up Captain Nantes who had gone in the same direction.

But if Old Cormorant was not looking for the man who had narrowly escaped Deeje's dagger, that person was watching him.

Captain Nantes, hugging the dark wall of a house in the first alley he reached, was listening to the detective's footfalls as they came on, breaking the silence of the almost deserted neighborhood, and telling him that some one was abroad besides himself.

The Bowery Vidocq passed within ten feet of Captain Nantes.

He was seen for a moment only by the pair of wolfish eyes that blazed in the villain's head; but in a short time the trailer was the quarry.

"The devil helps his own!" ejaculated Captain Nantes, as he watched the moving figure of Old Cormorant. "The first sight of him almost took my breath, and now I see him again. It's a mystery to me, but not one to him, perhaps. I thought the old trap held him securely. He was helpless when I looked at him last—unconscious, and apparently dead at the foot of the stair. The next time—ah! the next time!—there will be no failure!"

There was something startling in the spectacle of Captain Nantes hovering like a night-hawk over Old Cormorant's trail.

He no longer twirled the cane as when both Louis and his master saw him watching the Bowery quarters with the eye of a lynx.

He was dressed as when Old Cormorant followed him to the river, to lose him and his boat between the two cities.

Old Cormorant furnished Captain Nantes with the pleasure of tracking him home.

Man and man came down the Bowery, the watcher not far behind the watched.

Captain Nantes had the step of a cougar, and his handsome dark face and silken hands gave him a Malayish appearance, such as would have attracted Ixion, the tattooer.

"In the nest again!" exclaimed Old Cormorant's trailer, turning away from the house on the Bowery. "I don't know what you've discovered, Captain Cormorant. I don't care! This night you have crossed the threshold of doom! I wouldn't give the snap of a beggar's fingers for your chances to reach old age."

He ended his sentence with a bitter laugh, looked once over his shoulders, as if Old Cormorant might have turned the tables on him, and then quickly vanished.

But in a little while he turned up again in another part of the city.

"What did you do the other night?" he said to a young woman whom he faced in a small room.

"I?"

"Yes, you! You can't misunderstand me. There are but two of us here."

In an instant the face before Captain Nantes turned white.

"You came to his rescue!" he went on.

His companion—it was Lisa Dubarre, the French girl—left her chair and drew off, looking at him with a gleam of defiance in her eyes.

"You've no right to question me," said she.

"No right?" laughed Captain Nantes. "By heavens! if I haven't, I'd like to know who has!"

"No one!" answered the girl.

He watched her curiously for a moment as if debating in his mind just how to proceed.

"I didn't think you'd do that. He's your enemy," he resumed.

"Who is?"

"Old Cormorant, the man-hunter."

"I don't think he is," replied Lisa.

"Foolish creature, you don't know! He found you in the house when he went there. You are the last person he saw before the vapors overcame him. Convince him if you can, that you saved his life, ha, ha."

There was no reply, Lisa looking at Captain Nantes with the faint glimmerings of a derisive smile at her lips.

"Why did you do it? That's what I'd like to know," persisted the strange man.

"Don't ask me."

"A confession!" was the retort. "I thought you couldn't keep the secret! Murder will out some time. Had Old Cormorant ever befriended you?"

"No."

"Were you afraid they would find him among the ruins of Madam Medusa's den?"

"I was not."

"You wanted to make him your friend?"

"I did not."

"You have turned coward!"

In an instant the pale face that confronted Captain Nantes turned crimson.

Lisa came toward him with a quick stride, and her hand, darting out, closed on his arm.

"A coward, am I?" cried Lisa. "If I am, who made me such? Who made it possible for me to be hunted by one of those men who never follow honest, law-abiding people—one of those human cormorants ever on the track of guilt? If I am a coward, behold the man who made me so!" And the hand of Lisa covered the face before it, and her eyes pierced those that regarded her until they dropped.

"It won't help you, girl!" exclaimed Captain Nantes. "What if they get to looking in dead earnest for the woman who was Madam Medusa's servant? What if they pick up link after link of her past history? They won't have to go back very far."

"Don't!" cried Lisa, white again, as she thrust up her hands. "I did save Old Cormorant from the house. I dragged him into the yard and left him there."

"Why?" asked Captain Nantes coldly.

"He was not dead."

"Don't you know that it is better to have a dead wolf behind one than a living one?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you think so then?"

"My brain seemed in a whirl."

"A poor excuse. It was not so a few minutes before. But, woman, you had another motive."

Lisa made no reply.

"You wanted Captain Cormorant to find the trail. You did not want him to perish with the fortune-teller's house."

"Why not?"

"Because you are jealous!"

For a second Lisa seemed inclined to burst into a laugh.

"Don't say no!" continued Captain Nantes sternly. "The green-eyed monster was tugging at your heart-strings. Confess!"

"I will confess to no such impeachment!" exclaimed Lisa. "Jealous? of whom?"

The man twirled the ends of his mustache with his dark fingers, and eyed the French girl with an odd expression.

"You'll ruin us all yet!" he remarked.

"Then let me go."

"Whither?"

"Away from this city. I don't care where."

"But somewhere where you can talk and help Captain Cormorant, eh?"

"You misjudge me. As I have said, I could not see the man, detective as he is—perish miserably in Madam Medusa's den."

"Would you do it again?"

"I don't think you'll ever give me another opportunity."

"Right you are, Lisa!" answered Captain Nantes. "You'll never get another chance."

"Then you are going to try again?"

A malicious smile overspread the man's face. It was answer enough.

The French girl watched it for a moment, and then turned away, halting at the window, where Captain Nantes regarded her with the eye of a hawk.

She stood there until his rising startled her, and when she wheeled, she found herself face to face with him once more.

"You needn't change quarters again," said he. "Old Cormorant won't find you here if you don't want to be found. Neither must you think of going away. You should know sooner or later, perhaps, that escape is impossible. I don't want to have to speak sternly, Lisa; but you are in the game until it closes."

"You mean that I am to be watched—that, if I attempt to break through the web that has caught me, I will be terribly dealt with?"

"What an excellent interpreter you are!" smiled Captain Nantes. "Yes, my girl, there is no escape from the toils. Remember! Good-night!"

He touched his hat and opened the door.

There came no voice in reply until he was gone. Then Lisa Dubarre threw up her hands and clasped them above her head.

"In the toils! Yes! yes!" she cried. "Why did I ever let the dark eyes of that fascinating serpent lure me to ruin? Why did I follow him across the sea to become the tool of the death League transplanted in American soil from India? I saved the Bowery sleuth-hound; but I have refused to betray the game to him. I came hither to escape Captain Cormorant. But if I am to be called a coward—if I am suspected of treason—why not destroy the web before it can destroy me? I know who did it! I can put Old Cormorant upon the trail of the Unknown Hand. But dare I do it? In the toils! In the web! Courage, Lisa Dubarre, or all is lost!"

Even while the French girl was giving vent to such language in her new lodgings, Louis, the young detective, burst open a certain door on the Bowery, and surprised Old Cormorant at his table.

"What! haven't you heard?" cried Louis, landing before the detective by a single spring. "Where have you been that the news hasn't reached your ears? Lloyd Lispenard is in custody for the murder of his father! And they are going to make Ninon's testimony hang him!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNKNOWN HAND.

It was a curious and almost ludicrous expression which Louis's words drew from Old Cormorant.

"Taken into custody?" exclaimed the detective.

"Yes."

"Who did it?"

"Two detectives, Clew and Trailer."

"Hasty dogs!" laughed the old man. "When did it occur?"

"An hour ago."

"Where is Lispenard now?"

"At home."

"I thought—"

"The charge has been made," interrupted Louis. "He is, in fact, in custody at this time. The formal arrest will not take place until tomorrow. Captain Clew is at this hour holding the fort. He is quartered in the Lispenard mansion."

"That's rather cool," remarked Old Cormorant.

"Captain Clew is a cool head," smiled the youth.

"Where did you get all this?" asked the Bowery detective, after a moment's silence.

"I ran across Trailer, and he seemed to take especial pride, knowing our relations as he does, in telling me all about the arrest—a ten-strike," he calls it, and he openly boasts that his fortune is made."

"H'm! we shall see!" muttered Old Cormorant. "What did you say about Ninon's testimony?"

"Trailer says it will surely hang Lispenard."

"For the murder of his father?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it!" cried Old Cormorant.

He pushed his chair back and displayed more excitement than Louis had seen in his face for a year; but it was but momentary.

"Ninon isn't going to hang the man she loves," said he, calming down with an expression of resolution on his leathery countenance. "He won't let her, Louis! If Trailer was in a gossiping mood when he met you, he must have told you a good deal."

"He did. He forced me to recall the thrilling incident connected with my visit to Lispenard."

"Ninon's coming to you in the library?"

"Yes. You know we have agreed that the girl had a secret?"

"I recollect."

"Well, she seems to have half given it away. It is this: On the night of Lispenard's murder she saw Lloyd quit the house after midnight, something unusual for him. She happened to be reading at that hour, and his footsteps, coming from where his father slept, arrested her attention. The girl is positive. For a moment the light in the hall was strong upon the young man, and Ninon watched him closely until he left the house. He was gone an hour. When he came back his face was flushed and his step unsteady. Then Ninon saw him again. That is what Trailer says."

Old Cormorant had not missed a word of his pupil's narrative.

"How did they worm this confession from her?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"What does Lispenard say?"

"Nothing."

"Doesn't he deny?"

"He is silent. That looks bad."

"No verdict, Louis!" said the Bowery Shadow. "You don't know whether Lispenard denies leaving the house or not?"

"Trailer says they have proof, outside of Ninon, that he was out."

"The whole thing is infamous!" exclaimed Old Cormorant. "The web has caught Lispenard as well as some one else."

"But I don't see why he has not denied," persisted Louis.

"For the girl's sake, perhaps," exclaimed the Bowery Shadow. "To deny that which Ninon is positive she saw, would be to brand her the worst of falsifiers. Don't you see?"

"That is plain; but he is now in the shadow of the halter."

"So Clew and Trailer think. The whole thing is to come out to-morrow, eh?"

"To-morrow!"

Old Cormorant looked at his watch and mentally marked the time.

"You've been wondering what I've done, Louis?" he remarked, with a smile.

"I confess I have."

"Well, I've had a chase after Lisa. I've found Deejeah also—"

"Who is Deejeah?" broke in Louis, as if the strange name had peculiarly struck him.

"Deejeah is an importation who may play an important part in the game we're at. Besides picking up Deejeah, I think I've found Isis. And the cane-twirler of the Bowery, too!"

"No!"

"He gave me the slip nicely," added Old Cormorant. "I did not let Deejeah get away so easily, and while I was tracking her, I again ran across Captain Darkface."

"Is that his name?"

"No; but it's good enough until we know more about him. Deejeah had a mind to give him the full length of a dangerous-looking blade. She had just come from worship, too."

"From worship?" repeated Louis.

"From the shrine of Vishnu, her heathen god."

"Aha! Deejeah is East Indian, then?"

"And Isis's maid as well! But I've lost Lisa."

"Again?" cried Louis.

"Yes. The girl is shrewd. She is in the clutches of Captain Darkface, as I call him; and she is afraid to try to break away. Do you want to go out again to-night?"

"I'm ready for anything."

"I'd sooner go alone," answered Old Cormorant.

"After a link in the chain of the Madam Medusa mystery?"

"After any sort of link to be picked up."

The young detective watched Old Cormorant while he got ready to go abroad.

"If you go out before I come back, leave a message in the box," said the Bowery Shadow, when he had completed his arrangements for departure. "Don't let Lispenard's situation make you lose sight of the prize to be won—the ten thousand dollars reward. He's bound to pay it, no matter who is proven guilty. The Unknown Hand will be known some day. The two trails are coming together. Don't forget that Madam Medusa and Lot Lispenard died on the same night, by the dagger, and not two hours apart!"

With these words Old Cormorant withdrew, and Louis, in a state of half-bewilderment, heard his footsteps on the stair, and listened until they died away on the pavement beyond.

"I don't want to believe that Clew and Trailer have scored a victory!" exclaimed the detective's pupil. "For Ninon's sake, as well as for Lispenard's, I wouldn't have the arrest take place to-morrow. It will shock the whole city. It will send through the hearts of a million people a thrill of horror. Ninon must already accuse herself of being Lispenard's evil genius. Why didn't she keep the secret that was troubling her when she came to me? She loves Lispenard—loves him with her whole soul; yet, she fastens the noose of doom around his neck. If Clew and Trailer can prove that Lispenard was abroad when Ninon says he was, in Heaven's name, what can save him? Not my best work! Not Old Cormorant, with all his cunning!"

By and by Louis, tired of thinking over the deep puzzle which he was trying to solve, found weariness taking possession of him.

He knew it was not worth while to wait for Old Cormorant.

The Bowery detective might come back before morning; and several days might not bring them face to face again.

He opened the door which led to the little sleeping apartment adjoining the room, and took possession of Old Cormorant's cot.

"I want a clearer head to-morrow than I have now," said he; "but I can't get it by hacking away at the enigma with my eyes open."

Thus determined, Louis forced the Lispenard Mystery from his mind and fell asleep.

The clocks of New York struck twelve in five hundred towers.

The sounds died away above the quiet streets, but there came up the steps leading to Old Cormorant's lodgings, a sound which was not that of a clock's hammer.

Louis had left the outer door unlocked for the detective, and the gas he had turned completely out. In a little while the door opened, and the step which a moment before had sounded slightly on the stair, entered the first room.

It crossed the carpet to the portal of the sleeper's chamber; it passed beyond the second door, and all was still.

Five minutes later a cricket in Old Cormorant's outer room suddenly ceased her song.

Something had disturbed her. It was the patter of footfalls across the carpet!

Half an hour after these events the master-detective's pupil awoke with a start.

The dark room had a draft which it did not have when he retired.

He had shut the connecting door, but it was open now.

This was not all.

His collar, which was loosely buttoned when he fell asleep, was also open. It had been pulled down so as to leave bare his left shoulder!

It did not take Louis long to leap from the cot. He stood erect in the dense darkness of the little room, with a cold perspiration on his forehead.

Some one had invaded the place while he slept! A hand had loosened his shirt at the throat and turned it back, exposing the space between shoulder and neck!

The Unknown had left the door open on retiring, hence the draught.

"Lispenard's shirt was open in this manner when they found him dead!" suddenly exclaimed Louis. "Madam Medusa's skin was exposed in pretty much the same way. In God's name, who has been here?"

There seemed but one solution of the mystery, but, to Louis, it was no answer at all.

It only made darker that which was already dark; for there came to Louis in reply to his question, three terrible words:

"The Unknown Hand!"

With a startling cry, drawn from him by the sentence, the young detective sprang into Old Cormorant's room. It was almost as dark as the one he had just vacated.

The Unknown Hand was gone. It had come and gone in silence; it had loosened his collar while he slept, laying bare the place which, in the cases of Madam Medusa and Lispenard, the millionaire prince, had felt the sharp point of the murderous dagger.

But why had the Unknown Hand spared him after going so far?

Louis gave it up.

CHAPTER XIII.

ANOTHER LINK.

WHILE the young shadow was still excited over the mysterious visitation which, for some reason not yet known, had not left him dead in Old Cormorant's chamber, the sleuth-hound of the Bowery was trying to add another link to the chain he was industriously forging.

The arrest of young Lispenard seemed to be the propelling power which had sent him from his lodgings, and one would naturally think that he would have sought the house for an interview with either the accused or Ninon.

But instead of directing his steps toward the handsome structure, he sought another part of the city.

Was he going back to Lisa? or, was some other player in the game the object of his quest?

Old Cormorant seemed to find his destination in a ramshackle house, which was but one of many of its kind that lined a dark alley which the light of the street lamps did not penetrate very far.

"I thought you were never coming back!" exclaimed a rough-looking man with a scowl, at sight of the detective. "You promised that you wouldn't bother me any more. We can't trust you people, though."

Old Cormorant humored the man a little with a smile.

The room occupied by the pair was most forbidding of aspect. There were filth and squalor everywhere, and the grimy lamp that graced the grimier table did not reveal more than one-half of the wretchedness of the place.

The man before Old Cormorant looked like an escaped prison-bird.

He wore the ear-marks of Sing Sing, yet, for all his looks, he had a clear blue eye, and his hands were as soft as silk.

"What are you doing now?" he asked the detective. "Hunting some poor devil down, eh?"

"I've a little matter on hand, of course."

"A little matter, ha, ha! That's what you always call it. A little matter to you, of course, but in the end it'll fasten a rope under some man's chin, and make him dance on nothing."

"By Jove, it will if I don't fail!" exclaimed the Bowery Shadow.

"I thought so!" piped the repulsive man.

He then fell back in the rickety chair which he filled, and waited for Old Cormorant to make known his business.

"I believe you came to New York the last time in the Voltican?" said the detective.

The man started.

"Are you going back that far, Captain Cormorant?" he exclaimed.

"I am."

"Yes, I left her in the harbor, since when I haven't set foot on a vessel's deck."

"Ixion was with you then?"

"Ixion, the tattooer? Yes. I recollect him."

"You were much together?"

"We were companions."

"How many lady passengers had you?"

"A round dozen."

"All American?"

"No; we had an English widow and her maid—a devilish-looking girl—whom she picked up somewhere in India, the land of serpents and tigers."

"Had the lady many acquaintances on board?"

"She had several."

"Members of her own sex?"

"None of them were."

"Gentlemen of wealth, apparently?"

"They looked like it."

"Was one a darkish man, well-built, with perfect hands—"

"And a jet-black mustache, the ends of which occupied a good deal of his spare time?"

"Yes."

"We had him on board!" exclaimed Old Cormorant's companion. "He and the English widow got together pretty often when they thought no one was on the alert. Ixion and I saw them every now and then in secret conversation, which made me believe that they were friends of long standing, though the captain had presented them to one another at the start."

"Have you seen the man since landing him?"

"I saw him once since."

"Where and when?"

"In the court-room the day I got my sentence. I think that, perhaps, he may have dropped in out of curiosity; but when I caught his eye he turned and moved off, as if he remembered having seen me on shipboard."

"That may have been it," answered Old Cormorant. "What did he call himself on the ship? You never forget a name, Judas."

"If I did, by heavens! I forget mine!" cried the repulsive man—repulsive in all save the blue eyes. "I recall that gentleman's name now. It was Morillo Nantes."

"Not an American from the name."

"Nor from his jib-cut, either," was the response. "He had a private amusement while on board. Ixion caught him at it once and so did I."

"What was that?"

"It was below and at dusk, with not much light. I could see him, though—I don't care what they say against eyes like mine. This Morillo Nantes, with his coat off and his right sleeve rolled up to the elbow, was playing 'Malay.'"

"Playing what, Judas?"

"'Malay!' In other words, he was sinking the point of a dagger into the stuffed effigy of a man in the middle of his stateroom, the door of which happened to be opened at the time. Hang me! if I didn't think he was committing real murder at first. He would slip up behind the supposed victim with the stealth of a jungle cat, and quicker than lightning—and lightning's almighty quick, you know—he'd bring his dagger down between neck and shoulder! I don't think the knife varied a hair's breath in twenty strokes. He seemed to like it. Ixion said we'd hear from him some day; but that was five years ago, and—"

"And what, Judas?" queried Old Cormorant, as the man appeared to take new breath.

"And I haven't heard from him yet!" was the reply.

A singular twinkle appeared in one corner of the detective's eyes.

"Do you read the papers?" he asked.

"Me? Why should I read them? I might see that I am here—that I ought to have had ten years more than I got. You know how they gave it to me when they had a chance?"

"Then you don't know that, within the last few days, two people have been helped out of the world by just such strokes as you saw Morillo Nantes give his dummy in his state-room on the Voltican?"

"Great heavens! no!" exclaimed the ex-jailbird. "Are you after him?"

"I don't say that he did it," said Old Cormorant.

"No, you cannot do that. Captain Nantes—we got to calling him 'captain' before we were half-way across—knew how to handle a knife. I never saw but one other person who could do it as well, and, strange to say, I saw that person during the same voyage."

"Ah! you had another dagger expert with you?"

"We had. You will be astonished when I tell you. It was our pretty passenger, the English widow."

"Impossible, Judas!"

"No, not impossible. What I see, I see. Lady Isis—the Indian maid called her thus, you see—could make just as nice strokes as Captain Nantes."

"Had she a dummy, too?"

"By Jupiter! she had!" cried the ex-convict. "Ixion did not get to see her at play; but I had that rare honor. The maid, Deejeah, was always somewhere else when her mistress went through with the startling exercise; but Captain Nantes, as good as he was, couldn't beat her. When we had landed our passengers, I went below to look for the stabbed effigies; but not a sign of them could I see. I found nothing but a torn bit of paper which seemed to be a memorandum of a certain house in this city. I threw it down,

though I afterward wished I had kept it, for it might have enabled me to keep track of our queer passengers. Two years later I thought I saw the Indian maid on the street; but I lost her almost as soon as seen. She was a queer stick, too. She didn't like Captain Nantes. Many a time have I seen her watching him like a hawk. Why, she even used to follow him, Captain Cormorant."

"An old grudge, probably."
"I don't know. She looked dangerous. But I'd like to ask you—don't tell me if you don't think I ought to know—who's been killed by a dagger?"

"A man and a woman."
"Both in the same house?"
"No; many squares apart."
"Not man and wife, then?"
"No. The female victim was a fortune-teller called Madam Medusa."

"I knew her!" exclaimed the convict.
"A good many people did," replied Old Cormorant.

"The man was a rich banker—one Lot Lisperard."

"I didn't know him. My acquaintance don't run in that direction. Who is suspected?"

"The banker's son."
"He didn't do it!"

Old Cormorant looked at the man before him and smiled.

"I mean to say, I don't think he did," corrected the criminal. "Now, if I were Old Cormorant, having seen what I saw among the shadows on board the Voltican, I'd call the banker's son innocent till he'd been proved guilty."

"Then, you mean that you would look for two passengers who once played 'Malay' on the high seas?"

"I would! But here I'm giving you advice. You know what I am. I'd be a nice person to help justice, wouldn't I? Why, I couldn't get half a square from this old den before a hand would drop upon my shoulder and a voice would say:

"The very man we want, Rufus Ruff!" You're the man to do the hunting. I'm the one to hide from the police."

"Would you know Captain Nantes and Lady Isis?" queried Old Cormorant.

"I would! I never forget. I don't know what Ixion would say; but I can see the knife-play yet, even when I shut my eyes. It was exciting—terrible!"

The Bowery detective arose and stepped back.

"Captain Nantes, eh?" said he.

"Captain Nantes!"

The following moment something dropped into the lap of Judas. It was round and yellow.

"The link you've given me is worth more than that," remarked the detective. "I'll see that you get more at the end of the game."

"But I am not to give testimony anywhere. Remember!"

"I'll not forget," smiled Old Cormorant, and, with a parting look at the jail-bawk, he passed out, to be swallowed up by the shadows of the alley.

He had picked up another link, but his face did not show it.

The Unknown Hand was coming out of the shadows; but between him and it there lay the most exciting scenes of his eventful life.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FLY BREAKS THE WEB.

OLD CORMORANT could not dismiss from his mind the strange story he had just heard fall from the lips of the convict. "Judas," as he was called, was a man of many adventures.

For more than thirty years he had had the police of two worlds on his track. He had seen the inside of more than one prison; not for any very deep transgressions, but for mean, though minor, offenses.

Old Cormorant knew that he and Ixion, the tattooer, were old acquaintances; that their short life on the sea had been passed on the same ship; and when Ixion had told him about the Voltican's lady passenger and her maid, it was but natural that he should think of "Judas," and subsequently visit him for a confirmation and an expansion of the story.

He had received both.

A picture of a man stabbing an effigy in a ship's cabin rose before him while he hurried from the convict's ramshackle abode. He had been permitted to look at Captain Nantes in a new light. He now saw that his dark eyes, his light, springy step, and his long, soft hands were not for nothing.

But this was not all.

Nantes and the English widow were friends. They had been seen in secret conversation on shipboard, and their strange doings in their state-rooms told him that they were people of the dagger by practice, if not by oath.

Old Cormorant put "this, that, and the other" together as he flitted from light to shadow among the streets of New York.

"If I had Lisa now!" thought he. "The girl wants to break away from the web that holds her. If I could but find her—"

He had stepped upon the curbing of a small Park, and the sudden appearance of a figure,

rising in his very path, as it were, broke his sentence midway.

He was not thinking that he had come back to the Square where he had once surprised the French girl; but it was true.

But, greater surprise than this, Lisa herself stood before him!

The girl's sharp cry had startled the detective; but before she could quit the spot, as if she had suddenly changed her mind, Old Cormorant was at her side.

He did not show that the encounter was the very thing he had just hoped for.

"Were you waiting for me, Lisa?" he asked quietly.

"I can't say," was the reply. "This is the place where you caught me before, and I thought—"

"Thought I would come again, eh?" broke in Old Cormorant.

"I did not know but that you might."

The Bowery detective led the girl toward the center of the Square where the shades were deepest, and where there was less danger of being seen.

Once or twice he thought he saw a shiver shake the French maid's frame, and at one time he feared she was about to run away and baffle him.

"Let us sit down here," said Old Cormorant in front of one of the settees.

The girl silently obeyed.

"You move often, Lisa," he went on. "Didn't the last place suit you?"

"It did not."

"I hope you are better suited now."

"I am not. I never will be happy again!" exclaimed the girl impulsively.

"You are young, Lisa," answered Old Cormorant flatteringly, and then he added:

"And good-looking."

"Come! I don't want any of that!" cried Lisa. "You mustn't think that I like flattery because there's some French blood in me. Yes, I am young yet. If I were older, I'd have more wisdom, and I wouldn't be here with a man-hunter like you after midnight. I'm going to tell the truth, Captain Cormorant. I came hither in hopes of finding you."

"You've been successful," returned Old Cormorant. "Now, what is it?"

"I want to free myself from the devilish web that has me in its thrall at this moment! I know that the effort may cost me my very life, but better perish out of the web than in it! I've been on the rack in Tartarus for an hour!"

Lisa's face was white, and the detective could see that some great emotion controlled her.

"Do you know him?" she suddenly went on.

"Captain Nantes?" ventured Old Cormorant.

"Ah! who told you?" exclaimed Lisa. "Never mind. You may know more about him than I think. It is your business to know who people are and what they have been. In Captain Nantes you see the spinner of the web."

"And you the fly, eh?"

"I the fly! You know that I dragged you from Madam Medusa's house in time to save you from the flames that destroyed it?"

"Yes; you have told me this Lisa."

"But you don't know from whom I saved you."

Old Cormorant did not speak.

"It was from Captain Nantes," continued Lisa.

"Who is he?"

"A French Malay."

"Where from?"

"He has been five years in this country."

"Was his father a Malay?"

"No; he got that part of him from his mother. She was a Malay princess."

"Go on."

"Captain Nantes is more than an adventurer. When he was in India he held a responsible position under the Government."

"Ah! he was in India, then?"

"Yes. From Calcutta he came to Paris. There I met the villain."

"Who was he in Paris?"

"Monsieur Nantes. His lineage cropped out there, and he was dubbed 'the Malay Prince.' He didn't stay long in the capital. His knife got the upper hand of him."

"He used it, did he?"

"On a dissipated young count who got a downward blow between neck and shoulders, and went home dead—all in less than an hour. I saved the spinner of the web then."

"You, Lisa?"

"Foolishly, yes!" answered the French girl.

"He went from there to Malta, from Malta to this country, and, though an ocean separated us, he drew me hither. Such a man is Captain Nantes! He tells me that I must not go away. He has accused me of saving your life. He knows I did it. Why does he hate you? You want to discover who killed Madam Medusa, and why!"

"Then he doesn't want me to run the trail out?"

"He does not."

"Now, Lisa, why did Mother Medusa have to be killed?"

The girl moved away and looked strangely at Old Cormorant for a minute.

"What! don't you know?" she queried.

"I have an idea why. She had a secret."

"That is it! that is it!" exclaimed the French girl. "She was a woman of secrets, Captain Cormorant. She knew something about the mark!"

"The mark, girl?"

"The brand of the Indian Order."

A thought that thrilled him flashed through the detective's mind.

"Do you mean the Order of the Coiled Cobra?" he asked.

"I mean no other. Let me tell you. Madam Medusa was a charlatan in the black art. I assisted her in her deception. She made money hand over hand; but she was not altogether a fraud. She knew all about Captain Nantes. When he came to her one night, under pretense of consulting the Fates, she told him something that blanched his cheeks. And it takes a good deal to startle a dare-devil like him!"

"That sealed Mother Medusa's doom, did it?"

"It helped to."

"When did the woman come into the game?"

Lisa started back as if a serpent had suddenly lifted its head from Old Cormorant's hand.

"What woman?" she asked.

"Isis."

"I'm talking about Captain Nantes. I say nothing about a woman," answered Lisa. "He is the spinner of the web that holds me. The spell is broken, Captain Cormorant. You want to solve the Madam Medusa mystery. Remember that Captain Nantes is part Malay; that the young Parisian received the fatal stroke between neck and shoulder; and that the fortune-teller of Hester street went out of the world by a similar route. I say no more. I have done my duty. The trail is before you. You are shrewd enough to follow it."

Lisa left the settee with her last word. She gave old Cormorant a look which said "Good-night;" but she was not permitted to fly.

"Not yet!" exclaimed the detective, seizing her wrist.

"I've told you enough! Do you have to know everything before you can score a victory?"

"But one question: Where does Captain Nantes live?"

"You ought to know that," cried Lisa, and she leaned toward Old Cormorant and whispered a single sentence.

The following moment she broke from the grip which had loosened somewhat, and the Bowery Shadow saw her in full flight among the trees.

"A strange creature!" murmured the detective, a smile flitting across his face. "The poor girl, in a moment of fear and anger, has turned on Captain Nantes. She hasn't broken the thrall off the web as she thinks. She has only tightened it unless some one steps between her and the half-Malay before he discovers what she has done. The links fit together. The one furnished by Judas and the one just obtained by Lisa help complete the chain. The girl believes that Madam Medusa knew too much for Captain Nantes; but she would go no further. She knows about Isis; but she would not betray her. I haven't forgotten the letter which I have addressed to 'Lisa Dubarre' and signed 'Isis.'"

Long before this the figure of the French girl had vanished.

But there moved in the dark shadow of a tree, hardly twenty feet from the scene of the interview, the tall form of a man.

The very movement of this person told that he had been there for some time.

He watched Old Cormorant over his shoulder until the detective walked away, when, instead of following him, he went off in the direction taken by Lisa Dubarre.

Once, a square from the Park, he stepped from the trail long enough to part the mahogany doors of a fashionable all-night resort.

The next moment he stood revealed in the full blaze of the electric light beyond the portal.

He walked up to the counter and gave his order, and, while he waited, by the aid of the handsome plate mirror back of the decanters, he twisted the ends of his black mustache to needle-like points.

It was Captain Nantes.

CHAPTER XV.

"NICHOLAS NINGEN, JEWELER."

THE next day, just as the rich clock on Mrs. Isis Grahame's mantel had finished the last stroke of ten, Deeje heard the bell ring.

"Do I have to admit the yellow tiger again?" exclaimed the Indian girl. "I don't like him, and he knows it! One of these days he will feel that I hate him."

But instead of finding Captain Nantes on the step when she opened the door, she confronted a man whom she did not know.

He was a person of sixty or thereabouts, with deep wrinkles around his eyes, and a good deal of gray in hair and beard, the latter covering his face so completely that very little of the cheeks was visible.

Deeje looked her visitor over from head to foot and back again.

She was careful whom she admitted to her mistress's presence.

The man at the door extended a card, and the quick eyes of Deejeah read thereon:

"NICHOLAS NINGEN,
JEWELER.

WORK DONE AT PRIVATE RESIDENCES."

The caller waited just inside the door until the Indian girl returned to say that Isis was in, and that she would see Mr. Ningen immediately.

A moment afterward the jeweler stepped into a parlor at one side of the hall, and found the handsome mistress of the house in the depths of a chair, her face half-buried among the crimson plush flowers that formed the back, and her hands resting lightly in her lap.

Her dainty fingers still held the jeweler's card and, as Deejeah had done, she subjected him to a close though apparently not a very inquisitive scrutiny.

"So you do work for people at their homes?" said Isis.

Nicholas Ningen bowed.

"Were you recommended to try me?"

"No, madam. I visit well-to-do people at proper intervals, and do their work wherever it suits them."

"I have no commission for you."

The jeweler looked disappointed, but he replied with a smile as he bowed again:

"It is all right, madam," said he. "You have my card, and a note dropped into the city post-office will bring me hither with dispatch. I have many customers, and I would like to add you to the number."

"Stay!" exclaimed Isis, as Nicholas Ningen left his chair. "I would like to show you something."

She crossed the room and disappeared beyond an arras which separated the parlor from a smaller apartment.

In a moment she came back, carrying a little box covered with dark blue velvet. She bore it to the chair in which she seated herself and opened the box.

The jeweler watched her while she took from its depths a slender bracelet with a circle of rubies on top. The stones were very small, but they were beautifully arranged; and Ningen passed this compliment upon them when he had looked at the bracelet a short time.

"I don't wear it often," said Isis. "It has become too small for me." And she held forth her hand, showing the jeweler a plump wrist as white as marble. "Some time I may want to have the bracelet enlarged. It can be done?"

"Certainly, madam," said Ningen. "I've done a good deal of that work. Nowadays people don't need to buy new bracelets because the old ones have become tight. This is well done. American, may I ask?"

"No," said Isis, with a smile.

"Ah! I might have known!" ejaculated Ningen.

He was holding the bracelet in the light, so that the setting of the rubies was brought out in full.

"This is Calcutta work!"

Isis appeared to start.

"How do you make that out?" she asked.

"We jewelers have our peculiarities," was the reply. "Our work betrays us to our rivals. Am I not right, madam?"

A smile flitted across the woman's face.

"Never mind; we won't discuss this point," said the jeweler.

He handed the bracelet back.

"You will find me prompt to execute any commission you may have," he went on, and half a minute later he was at the door again and in Deejeah's care once more.

This interview did not take up half an hour.

The Indian girl let Nicholas Ningen out, and seemed to forget him the moment he had left the steps.

"A good deal!" exclaimed the man who walked from the house. "It wasn't an empty net, that cast. I've seen Isis face to face; have talked with her under her own roof! She is the passenger who stabbed the effigy in one of the state-rooms of the Voltican. Her hands didn't look like they'd play Malay; but Judas is positive, and, no matter what he is, I never caught him in a lie."

Nicholas Ningen did not return to his jeweler's bench after his interview with Isis.

He dodged into a certain street and vanished; but an hour afterward Old Cormorant ran up the stairs that led to his room on the Bowery, and found Louis anxiously awaiting him.

"Well, they've done it!" cried the young shadow, before Old Cormorant could speak.

"That they have!" was the response. "You prepared me last night for the ten-strike of Clew and Trailer. Lispenard is in the hands of the law."

"They won't admit him to bail?"

"No, of course not. He'll go to jail."

Old Cormorant uttered his words coolly, and without any traces of excitement. He seemed to take Lispenard's arrest as he would an everyday affair.

He went to the table and dropped into a chair. Louis, standing aloof, watched him with a puz-

zled face, for, though he had been connected with him a long time, the old detective was a veritable human mystery, deeper than any he had ever attempted to solve.

As if he were unconscious of the young man's presence, Old Cormorant took from an inner pocket a leathern pocketbook, from one of the compartments of which he drew a bit of folded buckskin. Unwrapping this, he emptied out upon a piece of white paper something which, to Louis, looked like the decapitated head of a black pin.

He saw Old Cormorant take up a small magnifying glass which he placed over the tiny object, and for five minutes of silence he used it with diligence.

"Well, what have you for me, boy?" he said, turning so suddenly that Louis, who had been watching him like a hawk, started guiltily.

"Some one was here last night."

"In this room?"

"Yes."

"While we were both away?"

"No. I was asleep on your cot."

"Did he disturb you?"

"He did not."

"What did he take?"

"Nothing."

"Then we are no poorer than we were before he came?"

Louis had come forward, and was now at the table.

"The Unknown opened my shirt. He exposed my flesh between neck and shoulder, rolling the collar back, and tucking it away as nice as you please. I don't know why he didn't go on."

Old Cormorant did not exhibit any excitement.

"Maybe he then discovered that the bed held the wrong man?" said he.

"I have thought so since," answered Louis.

"We must look out."

"That's our business—looking out," was the reply. "But let us dismiss your caller of last night. Look at this."

The old detective touched with one of his brown fingers the little object on the paper before him.

Louis bent forward and saw that it had a pronounced glitter.

"A ruby, isn't it?" he asked, glancing at Old Cormorant.

"A ruby," was the echo. "The glass will show you that it has once been in a setting. Some of the paste still clings to one of the corners."

"Did you pick it up last night?" ventured Louis.

"No; the first cast of the net caught it."

"Ah!"

"My visit to Madam Medusa's house netted me the ruby. I found it there."

"On the floor?"

"On the carpet in the room where she was killed," replied the Bowery Shadow.

"I would not have thought of looking for rubies there," smiled Louis.

"I wasn't exactly looking for them; but I never let them escape me when they're around. Madam Medusa almost hated rubies. The ruby was her evil stone."

"Then it was brought to her house?"

"Yes."

"But how came it to be left there? Stones when well set, don't often lose their balance."

"A sudden blow, a jar displaces them," said Old Cormorant.

"Do you think anything of this kind left the stone where you found it?"

"I do."

The detective returned the ruby to the buckskin, and having wrapped it up as before, placed the whole, not in his bosom, but in the secret niche in the wall.

"We've got a mess of strange-blooded people to look after," he said, coming back to Louis.

"People of what sort?"

"English, Indian, French-Malay, French-American, and, maybe of other blood. The unknown Hand is coming out of these mixed shadows, Louis. When was Lispenard in India?"

The young detective appeared to recoil.

"I don't mean the young man," continued Old Cormorant. "I'm talking about the dead banker. You have the Lispenard Mystery for your work, and you ought to have discovered something about his Indian life."

"His son was free to tell me. Lot Lispenard was six years in India. That was ten years ago. He came to America with the foundation of the immense fortune which he left behind. He was the soul of honor."

"So his son says, eh?"

"Yes."

"The soul of honor?" repeated Old Cormorant, his eyes twinkling in a manner that perplexed Louis. "Look ye, Louis. Do you call thus a man who joins a league to plunder sacred shrines and to take human life with, perhaps, a poisoned dagger?"

"Heavens! was Lot Lispenard such a person?" exclaimed the detective's pupil.

"He belonged to it, at any rate," answered Old Cormorant. "He wore the mark of the Coiled Cobra League until Ixion removed it. It was worse than treason to have that done. The

downward blow was not dealt until after that event. Now, I am going to drag the Unknown Hand from the shadows. Our trails have come together. They are one. The person who was here last night was looking for me."

"He won't give it up thus."

"No," answered Old Cormorant. "He will find me yet!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MALAY'S TRAP.

ONCE more night!

A man, with a dark mustache whose ends are stiff and have needle-like points, stands with folded arms before Isis Grahame, and looks at her as she sits in the velvet chair and gives him look for look.

"What are you going to do?" asks the English widow.

"You shall see."

"Can I help you?"

"No."

"You must not fail."

"Fail?" cries the man, our old acquaintance, Captain Nantes. "I don't think of that. Ah! I forgot. Yes, you can help me."

"Good! I'm glad of that."

"You can keep your dark-skinned tigress from dogging me. She'll provoke me too far one of these days."

"Deejeah?"

"Deejeah, the woman who, even in this country, bows to Neejar's shrine and worships the barbarous gods of her own dark land. Keep her in the house for twenty-four hours. After that I won't care. Then it will be too late to baffle me."

"I'll chain 'the tigress,' as you call her; but I don't call Deejeah dangerous."

Captain Nantes laughed in a manner that displayed his teeth.

"I do," said he. "But only hold her back that long. I'll ask no more."

"What have you done?" asked Isis.

"I've spun the web."

"One that will hold?"

"One that will hold!"

"There must not be a weak thread."

"There is not one."

"He is cool and cunning."

"A cat with nine lives, eh?"

"Yes, perhaps with ten."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Captain Nantes. "He got away by a miracle before; but with me the day of miracles is past."

Isis made no reply for a moment.

"I can have my bracelet made to fit my wrist," suddenly said she.

"The Indian one?"

"Yes."

"When did you consult a jeweler?"

"This morning."

"I did not know you were abroad."

"I was not. He came to the house."

Isis took from a convenient card-basket as she finished a piece of Bristol board which she handed to Captain Nantes.

With a glance he read thereon a name which the reader has already heard—"Nicholas Ningen."

"Was this man here?" he queried, glancing over the card.

"He was."

"I think you've been duped," remarked the French-Malay.

"Duped?" cried Isis. "How?"

"Nicholas Ningen may have been no jeweler at all."

"A spy, then?"

"Nothing less! You certainly did not have your eyes open."

"I was wide awake."

The English widow had changed color, and her face was quite white.

"What was he like?" continued Captain Nantes.

In a few brief words Isis described her morning visitor.

"I am satisfied!" exclaimed Nantes, laughing again. "You had for a caller Old Cormorant, the Shadow of the Bowery!"

Isis seemed to be driven into the depths of her chair by this decision.

"That man, the sleuth-hound of Gotham?" she cried. "Impossible!"

"Nay, not impossible. We must give him credit for all the cunning he is entitled to. Nicholas Ningen? ha, ha! So he said he could fix the Indian bracelet?"

Isis bit her lips, but made no reply.

"Now, more than ever, you will say I must succeed," said he.

"Yes, yes! What wouldn't I have given if I could have seen through the man's mask!" she exclaimed.

"It was a clever trick and cleverly executed," answered Nantes.

"I trust you now."

"I will not forget. Only, keep the Calcutta tigress out of the way."

A few more words passed between the parties, and Captain Nantes was in the hall beyond the door.

With his usual caution he sent a searching look up the stairs, but this time he did not see the lithe figure of the Indian girl among the

shadows along the balustrade; and, relieved by the non-discovery, he bade Isis good-night and departed.

But for all his fears, and despite the widow's promise, something slipped out of the house after him.

It was the figure of a woman, and her step was as noiseless as that of a cat.

Some time afterward Captain Nantes might have been seen standing at the window of a certain house, from which could be obtained a view of the sidewalk immediately below.

He was as motionless as a statue.

"The net is spread!" said he with a grim smile. "Now let the game come."

For thirty minutes he stood there with a dimly lighted room at his back, watching the sidewalk with the eye of the hawk.

At last one figure of the many he had seen turned suddenly toward the house.

"It caught him!" ejaculated Captain Nantes. "They must not say I have lost my old cunning. A Malay never loses his, and I'm proud of my mother!"

By this time he had seen the man on the step below. He heard a door open and shut, and then, while his black eyes seem to dilate with eagerness, he heard some one coming up-stairs.

In an instant Captain Nantes's whole attitude changed. He was no longer a human statue at the window.

A single bound carried him more than halfway across the room.

He reached up and seized a cord that dangled along the wall; he wound it twice about his hand, and then watched the door.

A minute later a footfall greeted his ears. It was just beyond the portal.

The sharp ends of the mustache were neglected now.

Captain Nantes was too busy to attend to them.

Rap, rap, rap, sounded on the door.

A low, feeble voice—it did not seem to come from Captain Nantes—said:

"Come in."

A second of suspense followed the invitation, and then the door opened.

Old Cormorant, the detective, was on the threshold!

If at that moment the fingers of the French-Malay could have dived into one of the Vidocq's pockets, they would have found the following words scrawled upon a piece of not very clean paper:

"CAPTAIN CORMORANT:—Will you come to me to-night, at ten o'clock? I have made up my mind to tell you *everything*. I have changed my lodgings once more, and for the last time, for I am very sick. If you really want to know some things, come to me at the hour mentioned above. I await you with anxiety. *Lisa.*"

A city address followed the name. Yes, Captain Nantes, if he had looked, would have found such a letter in Old Cormorant's pocket; but perhaps he knew it was there.

His hand seemed to tighten at the cord which it grasped.

He waited breathlessly for the Bowery Shadow to cross the step.

In a short time he was gratified.

Old Cormorant advanced into the room.

He passed the open door which hid Captain Nantes from view, and reached the center of the apartment.

Then it was that the French-Malay moved again.

He glanced from Old Cormorant to the rope, and all at once, in response to a quick, downward jerk, a dark chasm yawned at the detective's feet!

A startling cry burst from Old Cormorant's throat.

He tried to recover as the floor seemed to open at his feet.

As he sunk he attempted to clutch the nearest edge of the pit; but the tips of his fingers barely grazed it, and, while Captain Nantes looked on with a Satanic grin, the victim of his cunning, the old fox of the Bowery, disappeared from human view!

Once more Nantes jerked the rope.

He held it down until the parted floor came together again, and looked as strong as ever.

"I told Isis to let me do it without help, and the thing is done!" he exclaimed. "I didn't have the Indian witch on my track this time. The fox has been caught, and by as clever a bit of deception as Gotham has ever seen."

Now the neglected mustache received attention, and the ends were repointed by the dark fingers of the cunning Nantes.

He walked to the spot where the pit had yawned so fatally for Old Cormorant and put his ear almost against the floor.

Not a sound came up from below.

"Finished!" laughed the man, regaining his feet. "Done to the death, without any blunder! I've caught foxes before. The best and oldest are found napping sometimes. Let me see. What next? Ah! I had nearly forgotten!"

Not long afterward Captain Nantes was on the street, walking rapidly from the scene of his last exploit.

He had the air of a man who had achieved a solid triumph. Once more he twirled the cane

which had made him a marked man on the Bowery to both Louis and Old Cormorant; but he could twirl it with emphasis now, for the fox had been trapped—trapped by his own hands!

"Satan and Tom Walker!" suddenly cried Captain Nantes, when more than a dozen squares from the scene of his desperate play.

The cause for such a cry showed itself in the person of a woman who had crossed his path at the street corner.

Though seen for a moment, he had recognized her.

"They say she is the person who got him into the toils!" continued the captain, watching the woman so unexpectedly encountered. "But where has she been? And at this hour, too! I might score a point by following her, for something extraordinary has brought out upon the streets of New York at this time, Ninon Lispenard, the millionaire banker's ward."

For more than ten minutes the young girl had a spy at her heels.

She was careful to avoid the light as much as possible, and the very fact that she was abroad in very plain attire, intensified the interest Captain Nantes had taken in her.

He tracked her up one street and down another, until, at last, to his utter astonishment, he saw her enter the last house he would have thought of—the mysterious place presided over by Neejar, the guardian priest of Vishnu and his mysteries.

"The girl is up to something dark!" exclaimed he, looking at the closed door of the house. "With the man she professes to love in the death toils by her own admissions, she comes to the place where Deejeah worships! I don't understand this."

CHAPTER XVII.

NINON'S NARRATIVE.

MEANTIME Lloyd Lispenard, the son and heir of the dead millionaire banker, was feeling the cords of fate tightening about him.

As the reader knows, he had been placed under arrest charged with having taken his father's life.

Clew and Trailer, the partnership detectives who had taken the mysterious case in hand, had woven around the young man a web of dark suspicion. This was strengthened by his refusal to answer certain questions, and, when it was known that certain statements made by Ninon, the banker's ward, and Lispenard's betrothed, weighed heavily against him, the whole city settled down to the belief that the twin detectives had scored another victory.

Louis, Old Cormorant's pupil, was cast down. The young man had been staggered by the array of proof against Lispenard, and not even his master's words could give him hope.

It was the night that followed the events narrated in the preceding chapter.

The hour was nine.

Louis in the little room on the Bowery was waiting for Old Cormorant who, sly as he was, had fallen, as we have seen, into the cunning and deadly trap set by Captain Nantes, the French-Malay.

Presently the silence that surrounded him was broken by a footstep on the stairs, and a light and nervous rap was heard on the door.

Louis opened the portal, and, to his surprise, greeted Ninon.

Holding the door open, he looked into the girl's face for a moment, as if he could not credit the evidence of sight. Ninon's face was white, and Louis saw that a dark veil, which she had pushed back on his threshold, had been put on as a disguise.

"Where is Captain Cormorant?" asked Ninon.

Louis shook his head.

"You don't know, eh?" exclaimed Ninon, before the young man could speak.

"I have not seen him since yesterday."

"Is he on the trail?"

"He is on a trail," was the response.

"You know what has occurred?"

"Yes."

"They are saying that I am the person who will send him to the gallows. Heavens! I could not keep back what I saw that night. They will make me tell it again, and then the lawyers will twist it against him. Not a word of mine will they weigh in his favor. But I come here to say that *he* is innocent! I know it looks like a retraction of what I have already said. I know they will say that my desire to save him has forced this statement from my lips; but between us and the All-seeing One, I say again that Lloyd Lispenard is not the guilty man! Captain Cormorant is not here? I want him on the trail. When will he come?"

Louis did not know.

"You are his pupil," continued Ninon, quickly. "Having been schooled under him, you ought to have acquired some of his peculiar cunning. You ought to know his methods."

"He has never imparted his genius to any one, miss."

"I'm sorry," replied Ninon. "At this time I know not in what other direction to turn. But we must work. They have Lloyd Lispenard in the toils. The men who have run him down, as they call it, are boasting of their triumph. But some one else is rejoicing still more. I mean

the owner of the Unknown Hand. Will you listen to me, Mr. Louis?"

The young detective assured Ninon that he would be only too glad to do so.

She thanked him with a smile, and settling back in the chair she had taken, crossed her white hands in her lap.

"As you know, I am not a Lispenard," she began. "Lot Lispenard took me at an early age and made a ward of me. I have grown up in his house alongside of his son, whose mother died when he was a babe. Lispenard never talked about my parentage, and his kindness led me to keep from troubling him about it. Some years ago he placed me in the care of a friend in the country and went away. He was gone a long time."

"When I saw him again he had changed very much. His face was dark, like the face of a man who had spent years in a hot climate. He took me from the care of those to whom he had intrusted me, and we came back to the city. In the house I now found many things I had never seen there before. They consisted of rich bric-a-brac, such as I knew from my reading could be picked up but in one country—India."

"There were in the collection swords, daggers, idols, strange vessels, ornaments, and a thousand things of whose uses I was ignorant. He told me many stories about India; he could handle the swords like an expert fencer, and the daggers he could use like a juggler. In short, Lot Lispenard seemed an entirely different man."

"But all the time he appeared to live under a cloud of fear. He never went unarmed. He carried where it could be reached in an instant the keenest Indian dagger in the collection. I've seen him start at his own shadow. Lloyd noticed it, too. He seldom went out at night. Once, though, I remember he went out five nights in succession. After that his fears seemed to abate, but they soon came back. At the time of his dreadful death, he was virtually a prisoner of his own making, and in his own house. He grew morose, he quarreled with Lloyd. They had a tiff the evening before he died. Their hot words drove me from the room. One of the maids heard them, and the detectives are going to use her against their victim."

"Lot Lispenard had an enemy. It was against the murderous hand that he armed himself with the Indian dagger. It is true that Lloyd was seen to come from his father's room that awful night. I saw him, and I can't retract the statements I have made. He left the house. After awhile he came back with an unsteady step. The next morning at daylight he found his father dead—murdered in his chamber by a knife which had been driven downward between neck and shoulder to the heart!"

"He refuses to tell them why he left the house that night. He does not deny that he was seen by me to come from where his father was. He says he saw me watching him."

"But what is his story?" eagerly inquired Louis, who had let Ninon reach this stage of her narrative without a question.

"It is so strange that I can hardly credit any part of it," was the reply. "As yet he has told no one but me. To the detectives he is silent, though he knows that that very silence tells terribly against him. His story is that he was called into his father's room and given a written message to one Neejar, an old Indian priest who presides over a sort of Buddhist temple in the heart of this city. He was to deliver the message in person, to return and not report until the next day. He says he obeyed; that, at daylight, he went to his father's room, opened the door, which stood ajar, and found him dead."

"But the message, miss?" asked Louis.

"It was so sealed that not any of it could be seen. He says he was admitted to Neejar's presence. When the old priest read the message he tore it into a hundred pieces, and stamped them under his feet. He told Lloyd that he would not interpose a hand; that the man who had sent him deserved to die a thousand deaths, and that the end was near!"

"Do you think it was an appeal to Neejar for help?" questioned Louis.

"What else could it have been?" replied Ninon. "Lot Lispenard had spent some years in India. He must have known Neejar there. He may have visited the old man in this city. I could get no clue at the temple."

"You?" cried Louis.

"I went thither last night. The cobra-like eyes of the old priest of Vishnu glittered devilishly the moment they beheld me. His hand darted forward, and his fingers seemed to meet in my arm."

"You can't rob old Neejar of anything!" he cried, pushing me toward the door. 'You are not a child of Vishnu, and your feet profane holy ground!'

"I found myself back on the dark sidewalk in front of the old house almost before I could catch my breath. The door was shut in my face, and I seemed to sink into the stones. The sensations that took possession of my brain cannot be described. With a horrified look at the house, I made my way home. Something seemed to be on my track, but I had not the courage to look back. My little room and its contents seemed

to swim before me when I entered, and suddenly all became dark. I was found by my maid and put to bed, and this is my first outing since.

"I wanted to tell Captain Cormorant this story, but his absence makes you the sole listener," finished Ninon. "The old priest has a secret. He knows whether Lloyd came to him with a message. He knows who Lot Lispenard feared and against whom he carried the Indian dagger. It was not a murder for money. Not a dollar was taken by the Unknown Hand, nothing but the most precious thing of all—life! I don't think that the victim of that hand ever embraced the mystic religion of India. He never derided it to me, but I thought I could see that he was not a believer. Old Neejar knows."

"They can't force the old fellow to tell his secret," continued Ninon. "The destroyed message, could it be reproduced, would throw light upon this dark mystery. It would cut the cords that bind Lloyd Lispenard; but, as he says, it was torn up before his eyes and ground beneath the heel of Neejar. It was the dead man's last appeal for help against his enemy on his track. That appeal was treated with scorn. Neejar refused to help one who may have been his friend in India."

Ninon arose at the conclusion of her last sentence.

"If he comes soon, tell him all," she resumed. "Or, if you think you are fox enough, make use of my story yourself. The detectives would laugh at Lloyd's narrative and mine. They shall not hear either. But my life is devoted to the solving of the mystery. Old Neejar must give up his secret! It may have been but a notion that I was followed last night, but more than once, between the temple of mysteries and home, I thought I heard footfalls behind me."

"All that I can do shall be done," cried Louis. "The Lispenard Mystery was given to me at the start, and I have not left the trail. Now, I shall pursue the clue until it ends in something or nothing."

"Beware! I must say that," answered Ninon. "Beware of what?"

"Of the Unknown Hand! It is hidden, cunning and merciless. It comes in the night, armed with a dagger."

"I know that," smiled Louis. "It has touched me; but, somehow or other, it did not strike."

Ninon gave him an inquisitive look, said "good-night," pulled down her veil, and then left him alone again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DANGEROUS STEP.

ALL that day Louis waited for Old Cormorant, but he did not come.

Was it possible that the sleuth-hound of the Bowery had fallen into some death-trap—that his last words, to the effect that the Unknown Hand should find him, had met with a terrible fulfillment?

Louis could not account for Old Cormorant's absence.

But he had something else to share his attention.

Ninon's story seemed to have set him upon a new trail.

The girl's devotion to Lloyd Lispenard challenged his admiration.

She seemed to regret having spoken certain words in the hearing of the twin detectives—words which had been used with telling effect against the young man; but she had not admitted this.

She had sworn to devote her life to proving her lover innocent; but what could she do?

While the Unknown Hand remained undiscovered, what could take place that would save Lispenard?

Louis found himself on the street again within an hour after Ninon's departure. He had no well-defined purpose before him.

He stood in the shadows of the building, hoping that the night air would clear his brain. Either that or bring Old Cormorant back.

"I tried Ixion and he helped me once!" suddenly exclaimed Louis. "Why not seek the old tattooer again?"

This thought taking firm hold from the first, impelled the young detective across the city to the old house inhabited by Ixion.

"Back again?" exclaimed the tattooer, as Louis entered his little workshop.

"Yes, Ixion, I've come to bother you," was the reply, and Louis took the only visitor's chair to be found in the place.

"What is it now?"

The tattooer of New York had put aside a new design, and was looking into the youth's face.

"Ixion," said Louis, "you can help me to-night?"

"By giving up a secret or two?" grinned the strange man on the bench.

"I hope not."

Perhaps Ixion thought of what Old Cormorant had wormed from him, for he smiled grimly and made no reply.

"There is a man in New York named Neejar," pursued Louis.

"Neejar the Indian!" was the quick retort.

"What is he, Ixion?"

"He is the keeper of a temple of Vishnu for the devotees of the mystic religion of India who inhabit this city."

"Who is he?"

"Hal! that's another question!" exclaimed Ixion. "From 'what' to 'who,' in this case, is a big jump. Neejar could probably give you all the information you want; but would he?"

"Ah! that is it! The chances are that he would padlock his lips. Not only that, but I wouldn't get a chance to look beyond his threshold."

"Oh, yes; you can get that far, Louis."

"How? I'm no Brahmin."

"Neither am I, but I can get you into the old fellow's temple."

"You, Ixion?"

"I!"

Louis looked in credulously at the tattooer.

"By Jove! I'd try to get at the old man's secret if I could penetrate beyond his door!" he exclaimed.

"Nothing easier."

As he spoke, Ixion opened a drawer underneath his bench, and took out a peculiar-looking piece of paper not as large as his hand.

"Does the cause of justice demand a visit to Neejar's place?" he asked, glancing up at Louis who was watching his every movement.

"It does," was the firm reply.

Ixion dipped one of his indelible pens into a small black inkstand within reach, and partly covered the paper with strange-looking characters which Louis imagined were Hindustani.

"Thrust this into the aperture that will open in response to your knocks," said the tattooer, handing Louis the paper. "Recollect, however, that you go to Neejar's at your own risk."

"Certainly. But is it risky?"

"These heathen are singular people," answered Ixion. "Neejar's very position makes him a person of mysteries—a storehouse of secrets of the world are locked up in that old man's bosom. I'm no keeper of secrets at all compared with him. The chances are, as I have said, that you will get no further than the door. The paper may not admit you after all."

"But you know Neejar?"

"I did!" replied Ixion. "He perhaps remembers me. Why, I helped him to this country. Our vessel carried him and his temple, his god, Vishnu, and all his religious effects."

"What about his patrons?"

"I don't concern myself about them," smiled the tattooer. "I think I've transacted business with several; but you see I have so many customers that I can't keep track of all."

Louis looked once more at the piece of paper which Ixion had given him, and, with a smile, transferred it to his pocket.

"Here goes!" he exclaimed, rising.

"I'd like to ask, for you've made me inquisitive, what particular point you're after now?"

"For one thing, I want to see this mysterious Neejar."

"But that is not the main thing?"

"It is not. I want to know why he refused to entertain a message from Lot Lispenard."

Ixion fell back with a cry of astonishment and stared at Louis.

"Did Neejar do that?"

"He did."

"When?"

"On the night that Lispenard was struck down by the Unknown Hand."

"Who carried the message to Neejar?"

"The millionaire banker's son."

"Ah! I see!" exclaimed Ixion. "You are working for the young man?"

"I am."

"You want to show why he left the house that night?"

"I do."

"But that is not all you want to discover."

"It is not."

"Well, you won't find out much by pumping Neejar. Do you think young Lispenard really took the message to the temple?"

"I am convinced that he did."

"That would show that Lot Lispenard knew Neejar."

"It would. He made an appeal of some kind to the old man. They may have met in India."

Ixion made no reply.

"I wish you success," said he, when a minute afterward, Louis moved toward the door. "You would go, boy. Remember, there's no responsibility on Ixion's hands."

"None whatever, my friend," smiled the young detective. "This venture is wholly mine. I assume all risks. I must see Neejar, the priest of Vishnu. I must pass his threshold. Justice sends me thither."

Louis found the eyes of Ixion riveted upon him until he reached the door and had said good-night. The response was "good-by."

Down on the street, the young ferret found himself wondering why the tattooer had made use of several peculiar words which had dropped from his tongue. And, to increase his wonderment, Ixion, instead of saying good-night, as he was wont to do, had said good-by.

But the new mission soon drew Louis's thoughts into another channel, and he was on his way to Neejar's Temple.

Old Cormorant's encounter with the Indian—

an event which took place some months in advance of our story—had acquainted him with the exact location of the house, and his knowledge of the by-ways of New York enabled him to reach it in the shortest possible time.

Louis had lost no courage during the journey. He wanted to see this dark-skinned depositor of secrets; he longed to reach the man who undoubtedly knew something about Lispenard's enemy—the heathen who might have saved the banker from the work of the Unknown Hand.

Louis found the vicinity of Neejar's place dark and still.

The only sounds that disturbed it at all were those made by his own feet on the narrow sidewalk that fringed the alley.

The young detective crept down through the shadows until he reached the mysterious door.

He walked up to it and rapped.

His knuckles seemed to send the sound through the house beyond.

In a little while a step came toward the door from within.

A moment later Louis was looking at two glowing eyes that resembled live coals set in a head of ebony.

"Neejar or the devil!" thought he.

Almost as soon as he saw the orbs Louis thrust the paper into the aperture in the door and saw it clutched by a bunch of spectral fingers.

Then he held his breath and waited.

"Good! I'm going in!" he mentally exclaimed as the door opened, and the following second he slipped in and stood in a hall of shadows.

The door had shut with an ominous click, and the youth was alone with a half-naked figure which he knew was Neejar.

For a second or two the dark form between him and the door remained as motionless as a statue, then it came toward Louis with a spring, and a hand gripped his own.

"Come!" said a voice, and Louis was dragged away and escorted into a room darker than the hall.

"What brings the unbeliever to the sacred courts of Vishnu?" asked the same voice.

"Are you Neejar?" asked Louis.

"I am Neejar!" was the response.

"Then, I am here to ask a question in the interest of justice."

"Not to worship, then?"

"No. I—"

"Wait!" interrupted the Indian mystery.

The grip at the young detective's arm suddenly loosened, then a bright light like the flame of a match flashed in his face, and he saw Neejar in full from head to foot, stripped all to a white cloth about his loins.

The eyes he had seen at the door had more evil in them than ever.

"Hol! the robber—the heathen dog that runs the trail—wants to rob Neejar of his secrets!" assailed Louis's ears. "Did the suspicious girl send him to get what she could not get herself? He comes to Neejar's Temple as a spy! He shall never go forth again!"

The light, darting to the floor, went out, and Louis instinctively fell back.

But through the darkness there came a feeling hand, swift, silent and certain, as if directed by a pair of owl eyes, and, as it touched Louis's throat, a cold shudder went over his frame!

He recoiled just enough to miss the grip that sought him, and then, quick as a lightning stroke, almost, he seized the bare wrist of the Indian priest, and the next moment he was struggling for life in the dark room with the slippery foe!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAP OF VISHNU.

PERHAPS Old Cormorant's pupil regretted the step he had taken when he felt the wiry arms of Neejar, the Indian, about his body.

Those arms, naked and slippery, seemed to represent two immense serpents about to crush him in the dark; but Louis did not despair.

He tried to throw Neejar off, but in vain. Then he attempted to clutch the dark throat of his enemy, but at every turn he was baffled.

The two men struggled and slipped across the carpetless floor, now touching the wall, and now in the center of the room again.

Not a word was spoken.

Louis was practically unarmed, and he did not know what sort of weapons the priest might have somewhere in the folds of the cloth about his waist.

At length, to the detective's infinite joy, he found the hunted throat.

In an instant he sunk his fingers in it, and transformed them into a powerful vise.

At the same time he pushed Neejar against one of the walls of the dark arena and despite his twistings held him there.

Louis did not think of anything but the advantage he had obtained. He did not seem to mind the hands that were trying frantically to break his grip. He knew that if he failed to hold Neejar where he had him, the game was up.

Tighter and tighter grew the young detective's clutch. He put his whole strength into it,

for there and there alone lay safety and triumph.

Several minutes passed before Louis felt that the advantage gained was not transitory.

He discovered that Neejar's struggles were lessening.

"Courage!" said Louis to himself. "Instead of the Indian anaconda choking me, I am choking him."

It was even so.

At length the young shadow seemed to hold a dead man against the wall.

The priest of Vishnu appeared to have neither life nor motion.

Louis loosened his grip.

He stepped back and heard something slide down the wall and strike the floor with a strange sound.

It was the body of Neejar!

For some time the victor stood breathless and trembling on the field of his hard-won triumph.

About him reigned the silence of the grave.

He was shut up in the house of mystery. He had come to it for Neejar's secret, and he had probably choked Vishnu's priest to death!

By and by Louis resolved to investigate.

He took a match from his pocket and, leaning forward, ignited it on the wall.

The little flame, shooting out, showed him a figure lying at the foot of the wall.

He stooped and held the match over it.

Neejar lay at his feet!

Louis caught at the limp hand and placed his fingers at the pulse.

There was no beat.

As Louis rose, the match gave an expiring flicker and went out.

"I had to do it—for my own life!" murmured the young man. "Neejar will keep his secrets now. We may never know the truth about Lispenard's appeal. The next worshiper at Vishnu's shrine will find him where I leave him."

Louis's plan was to quit the house as soon as possible.

He found the door through which he had been conducted into the chamber of combat, and in another moment he stood once more in the hall with the dim light around him.

"Why not look around a little?" thought Louis, "the temple might reveal something."

He approached the door which led into the sacred chamber, turned the knob without noise and entered.

At first, owing to the vague light that prevailed, he saw nothing definite, but gradually a fantastic image of giant proportions shaped itself before him, and he saw the god Vishnu in all his beathen grace.

But Louis saw more than this.

Bowed on a bare bench at the base of the deity was a figure that held the young detective's gaze from the moment he saw it.

He had entered the sacred place so noiselessly that he had not disturbed the worshiper, and now he stepped deeper into the shadows and looked on.

The unknown form at the feet of Vishnu was a woman's!

The face was turned from Louis and he could not catch the slightest glimpse of it.

He concluded that she was at her devotions when he came, and that his fight for life in the adjoining room had not reached her ears.

Some ten minutes elapsed after Louis's arrival in the altar room before the figure moved.

All at once it sprang up and stood erect before the idol.

Louis then saw that the unknown had a tall and well-shaped figure, that it indicated youth and great suppleness.

Suddenly both hands went toward Vishnu in an attitude of pleading.

The next moment a voice smote his ears, but the language was not intelligible.

For several minutes the unknown talked rapidly to the god.

The tones were low and melodious, but Louis did not understand a word.

"Will she never end?" the young detective asked himself.

The voice ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

The devotee turned round, and the keen eyes of Louis saw that she was Indian—dark of skin, but beautiful.

"It must be Deeje," inwardly ejaculated the young detective, riveting his eyes upon the girl—she did not look beyond twenty. "She came hither when Old Cormorant was last here. What is that in her hand? A dagger? It is nothing else—one of the twisted daggers of the life-taking sect of India. She has been consecrating it to a certain purpose at the altar of Vishnu. Is the girl a female thug? She intends to use the Indian dagger upon some one. The dark sect bring their knives to Vishnu to be blessed. Deeje has brought hers. By Jove! she looks like a handsome tigress!"

All at once, while Louis regarded the Indian girl with thoughts of this kind, the twisted dagger suddenly vanished, Deeje waved Vishnu a farewell, and went toward the door.

Louis could have touched her as she passed, but he withheld his hand.

Not for the world would he have betrayed his presence to the girl.

He saw her pass into the hall, he heard the

outer door open and shut, and then he was alone once more, and probably the only living person beneath Neejar's roof.

Louis stepped to the lamp and turned on more light.

In an instant the whole room was before him. Every detail of Vishnu's garbing was seen, and for a few seconds the young detective stood breathless before the strange spectacle.

There was nothing about him to show him that he was in the heart of New York, and not in some Indian city.

The walls were hung with the decorations that give such a singular effect to the interior of Indian temples, the statues of Vishnu and his companions were full size and complete, and the sight and the silence impressed Louis as he had never been impressed before, and for a little while held him spellbound where he stood.

"This is all bosh!" suddenly exclaimed the detective. "I can get no secrets here. The secret-keeper lies across the hall. I might have discovered something by following the girl. She has gone after her victim with the consecrated dagger, and I am here, like a fool, in the house of Vishnu."

Louis was about to quit the place when a little door opened slowly in the base of the main statue.

It opened without the assistance of any human agency so far as the young ferret could see; but he thought at once that some mystic power was at work.

In a little while he saw a dark hand protrude from the aperture, then a head with a pair of glittering eyes, and finally the long, lithe body of a youth naked to the waist, which wore the traditional white cloth of the Brahmin.

Louis seemed to shrink deeper among the shadows of the corner where he stood, and from them he watched every movement of the Indian boy.

He saw the dark form lift itself nimbly from the floor to the arms of Vishnu; he saw one of the hands dive among the folds of the waist-cloth and take therefrom something which was deposited in the idol's lap.

Having done this, the Indian dropped back, fell upon his knees in front of the statue, and slipping into the hole at the base, closed the door behind him and vanished.

"Mystery upon mystery!" exclaimed Louis. "I wonder if I could imitate the young Indian?"

He crossed the floor to the idol, put up his hands and raised himself with ease.

The next moment he was looking into the idol's lap.

"Hal a little treasure-house!" cried Louis, picking up something carefully wrapped up and tied with a yellow string.

He climbed down again and leaned toward the light.

Then, with eager hands, he opened the paper. There were three wrappers, each one covered with strange-looking writing, and in the folds of the last lay a heavy gold ring whose setting was a gibbeted heart crossed by two arrows!

"Heavens!" cried Louis. "Here is the Indian design again—the one which Ixion removed from the breast of Lispenard!"

Instead of throwing the find back into the lap of Vishnu, he clutched it the tighter and went toward the door.

"Ixion can read Hindustani!" was the one thought that now surged through the detective's mind. "He must tell me what the papers say that inclose the ring! The god Vishnu may have given me a clue!"

He went back to the abode of the tattooer. He found Ixion at his bench, and, without introduction or ceremony, he placed the strange things in his hands.

The tattooer of New York recoiled with a sharp cry and stared at Louis.

"In God's name," he exclaimed, "did Neejar surrender these?"

"No, but Vishnu did. What are they, Ixion?"

"They are the things which Neejar withheld from Lot Lispenard!" was the reply.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PLUNDERER PLUNDERED.

Sudden excitement seemed to fire the young detective's brain.

What! had he made a discovery as important as this?

"Don't deceive me, Ixion," he cried. "I am in no mood to be trifled with. Give me nothing but the truth."

"Just what you are getting, boy," answered the tattooer with a smile, and Ixion's eyes fell upon one of the coverings of the ring which lay open before him.

Louis picked up the signet and examined it in the light.

He saw that the device of the Order of the Coiled Cobra had been engraved by a master hand; that, while the ring showed signs of having been worn, the crest was as bright as though it had just come from the jeweler's hands.

"What say the papers, Ixion?" suddenly asked Louis.

The tattooer of New York did not appear to hear him.

"You'll be hunted high and low for this!" said Ixion when he looked up.

Louis could not repress a smile.

Who would hunt him?

Neejar?

Had he not left the dark-skinned priest of Vishnu in no condition to hunt any one?

Even then he saw the figure of the old man lying motionless at the foot of the wall with silence and gloom for grim companions.

Would the Indian youth who had crawled from the interior of the idol turn hunter and avenger?

Impossible! The servant had not even seen him.

"I'll take the chances," replied Louis. "I know that my visit to Neejar's Temple has not been fruitless. But, as yet, you have told me but little, Ixion."

"I have said that these things must be the things which Neejar refused to restore to Lispenard through his son, assuming that the young man really went thither, as he says."

"But what says the writing? You understand Hindustani!"

"The papers tell a great deal."

"One of Neejar's secrets, eh?"

"Yes. Did you say that Vishnu, and not the old priest, surrendered it?"

"I did."

Ixion's countenance was a puzzle.

"Tell me how you got the package," said he.

Knowing that the tattooer was a friend who could be trusted, Louis detailed his visit to the beathen temple from the moment of his entrance to that of his departure.

He took care, however, to leave Ixion under the impression that Neejar had been choked into insensibility. He could not bring himself to the point of divulging his own convictions in this regard, though the truth is, he believed that a dead man lay in the little room opposite the temple itself.

Ixion seemed strangely interested in the story as it fell from the young detective's lips. The existence of the Indian boy in the base of the idol was received as a revelation; but the tattooer nodded when Louis said that the female devotee with the dagger must have been Deeje, of whom he had heard from Old Cormorant.

"Captain Cormorant could not have done better!" exclaimed Ixion at the end of the narrative. "Indeed, it is doubtful whether he would have succeeded at all. The fight with Neejar led to the discovery of the treasure in the lap of Vishnu. You would not have found it if you had not overcome the old priest, boy."

"Nor if I had not seen the Indian boy swing himself up to the idol's arms," answered Louis. "It cannot be that he dropped the package where I found it."

"No; it has evidently been there a long time. Vishnu is a keeper of secrets. Neejar, in his blind faith, believed that man would never look into the idol's lap for the ring, hence its singular hiding-place."

"But how came the signet into the priest's possession? The writing ought to throw some light upon this mystery."

"Lispenard lost his ring in India," answered Ixion.

"Does the writing tell you this?"

"It does. And it tells me more, too. He knew that it was in Neejar's hands. The old man has guarded it for many years. He knows the secret of Lispenard's life. He was aware that the American belonged to a brotherhood which was to have inaugurated a scene of sacrilege among the sacred temples of India. He believed that the *fac-simile* of the ring's crest was still on Lispenard's breast, for Neejar could not know that my art had removed it. Now, if Lispenard had the ring back, he could defy the holders of the secret of his past. He would not have to fear the enemy on his track. He could even say to his foe: 'You can't prove that I once belonged to the Coiled Cobra. Where are the ring and the tattooed sign?'"

"But why did Neejar withhold the ring?" queried Louis.

"The designs of the Order were against his religion," said Ixion quickly. "He had Lispenard in a trap. Undoubtedly he had been appealed to before. The last appeal angered him. He is represented as having torn up Lispenard's letter and trampled it under his feet. That night, as you know, the Unknown Hand came. If the son had carried the ring back, the catastrophe might have been averted."

"Do you think, Ixion, that the consecrated knife had to do with it?" asked the young detective.

"Not the one you saw to-night," was the response.

"Is there another?"

"Ay," smiled the tattooer. "The one you saw had a twisted blade, eh?"

"It had."

"A long and slender blade?"

"Yes."

"Lispenard's death-wound was straight. I have seen those made by the twisted blades of the East."

"Then, I must not shadow the girl I saw at Neejar's altar.

"You must not. She nor Neejar wanted Lisperard's life for the past. The banker had left the Order, understand."

"And to desert it was equivalent to treason, eh?"

"It was!"

"Ah, I see!" exclaimed Louis. "He was punished as a traitor!"

There was no reply, and during the silence the tattooer's eyes wandered to the strange writing again.

"Here is a mystery deep enough for Captain Cormorant," he presently said.

"But it is mine!" cried the young shadow.

"Captain Cormorant is on the trail of Madam Medusa's slayer."

"Killed the same way?"

"Yes."

"And on the same night?"

"It is true."

At this moment the eyes of the two friends met.

"And by the same hand? By Jove! your eyes say so, Ixion!" exclaimed Louis, clutching the tattooer's wrist. "Captain Cormorant said when we last met that our trails had come together. It must be so! I see it now! It could have been done. The two crimes are two hours apart. This alone proves Lloyd Lisperard innocent!"

"It doesn't loosen one of the coils that encompass the young man!" said Ixion, quietly. "To convince the police, and to save Ninon's lover, you must unravel the whole skein. In other words, young man, you must produce the guilty—the Unknown Hand, as you say."

Louis sat dumfounded before the tattooer of Gotham.

The magnitude of the task and the depth of the mystery before him seemed a work from which a Hercules-detective might shrink appalled.

"What must be done will be done! I swear that here, Ixion!" suddenly, cried Louis.

"Not alone, Louis. You must give the master your new clew."

"Old Cormorant?"

"Old Cormorant!"

"Give it to me, then!" And the detective put forth his hand for the articles which he had taken from Vishnu's lap.

Ixion hesitated a moment when he slowly restored the ring to the papers as when they were handed to him and once more Louis had the singular find in his possession.

He put it carefully away in an inner pocket, buttoned vest and coat over it and gave the tattooer a look of triumph.

"It will be sought after," said Ixion, returning the look.

"The prize I hold?"

"Yes."

"Who will hunt for it?"

"Its lost guardian."

"Neejar?"

"Neejar!"

Louis returned a derisive smile, and for a second he was on the point of telling Ixion that he had left the priest of Vishnu dead in his house of secrets.

"The old Indian will never find the prize! I guess I can guard it against him!" laughed the young detective. "Two of us on one trail ought to succeed. The Unknown Hand will have to look out from this time on!"

Ixion, who was looking strangely from his bench at Louis, vouchsafed no reply, and the youth was allowed to take his departure almost amid silence.

"He don't know Neejar of the Indian priesthood!" suddenly laughed Ixion, before Louis was at the bottom of the staircase. "A mere choking is nothing. I wish to Heaven I had not given the boy the 'open sesame' to that dark den of heathen mysteries! Neejar will go to Vishnu's lap the first thing he does after recovery. Not finding the package there, he will quit the mystic altar long enough to get even. I know something about these mysterious disciples of Buddha. Louis knows nothing; but unless he is ever on the alert, he may learn much to his sorrow."

Meantime Louis had left the tattooer's abode and was flitting from street to street on his way back to the Bowery lodgings where he hoped to find Old Cormorant.

"The trail is a little lighter!" he said to himself. "Old Cormorant will see more than I do. As to Ixion's fears that I will soon find the old Indian on my track, I can laugh at them. Neejar will hunt no one. This is the secret which I must make my own."

Half a square distant Louis stopped and looked back.

He fancied that he had heard a footstep; but no, it was a delusion.

"This way shortens the journey, and I'm burning to see Old Cormorant!" he exclaimed, darting down an alley-like street.

In a little time he stopped again.

No, it was not a footfall.

Imagination.

Louis laughed at his fears and went forward once more.

All at once something dropped over his head.

It was pulled tight with the fury of a fiend, and the next moment he was dashed up against the wall of a house.

Then, while he struggled for air, he felt his coat torn open, and a hand entered and left his bosom.

He had lost the treasure found in Vishnu's lap.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MALAY'S FEARS.

THERE sounded in Louis's ears for a moment afterward the noise of flying footsteps.

As soon as he could, he tore the covering from his face and looked down the street, but saw nothing.

It was hardly worth while for him to push his hand in his bosom.

He felt that he had been robbed, and robbed of the precious things he had taken from the idol's lap.

But Louis did investigate, only to have his worst fears confirmed.

The packet was gone! The hand of the Unknown had plundered him with a dexterity which could have no equal.

Some minutes elapsed before the young detective could resume his journey.

It would be useless to look for the thief. He had come like a shadow and like one had departed.

"I must have been followed from Ixion's," said Louis to himself. "There seems to be thugs in America as well as in India. We will see whether this dark play helps any one in the end." And Louis started on once more, this time with no stealthy footfalls to keep him company.

He found no one at Old Cormorant's quarters, and there was nothing in the secret niche to tell him that the Bowery detective had been there during his absence.

Louis was nonplused.

Was Old Cormorant so hot upon the trail of Mother Medusa's slayer that he could not find time to visit the little room for a moment?

Louis sat down and thought over his last adventures, beginning at the beginning. He still adhered to the belief that he had ended Neejar's priesthood in the fierce struggle in the dark; but when he attempted to fix the identity of the person who had robbed him, certain doubts would come up in spite of himself.

For two hours the young pupil of the Bowery Shadow wrestled with the puzzle that confronted him.

"Neejar! It must have been the old Indian!" he exclaimed at last. "I can extract nothing but 'Neejar' from the problem. He has wonderful vitality. I did not choke him hard enough. A little more and I might not be mourning the loss of the prize. Confound the wiry demon! Not after all, perhaps, I ought to thank him. The wonder is that I did not get one of those twisted daggers for what I did."

Down on the street, while Louis was thus engaged, stood a man who watched the window of Old Cormorant's room with a great deal of curiosity.

He was a well-built person, trimly dressed and good-looking. The ends of his mustache had sharp points, and every now and then his soft dark fingers tried to make them more pointed still.

As the reader has guessed ere this, the watcher was Captain Nantes.

Had the victim of his trap escaped that he had come back to the little house on the Bowery? Had the old detective played a trick as sharp as his own, and left the dark hole beneath the floor eager to finish the trail of the Unknown Hand?

Captain Nantes could see that there was a light in Old Cormorant's room.

He knew that some one was there, and it was for that one that he waited with the patience of the cat at the hole in the wall.

One victory was not enough for the French-Malay, the friend of Isis and the foe of Deejeah.

He wanted to score another, for in the person of Louis, he saw a chip of the old block, and seemed to feel that danger lay in letting the pupil run at large, even though the master was surely caged.

But the watcher was also watched.

Not far away stood a figure that could not have been picked out from certain shadows by the keenest eyes abroad that night.

Captain Nantes, watching the entrance to Old Cormorant's abode, was eyed by the person among the shadows with equal perseverance.

At length the light beyond the windows went out.

Captain Nantes pulled his hat over his eyes and prepared to play trail-hound again.

In a little while the form of Louis appeared on the sidewalk.

"The boy! I thought so!" exclaimed the French-Malay. "I knew it could not be the old fox himself. I've settled that!"

He watched Louis with unabated eagerness, seeming to regard the young detective as a person who was dangerous enough to require looking after.

When his quarry started off Captain Nantes moved and so did the person among the shadows some feet away.

Louis went as straight as possible to the Lisperard mansion.

It was strange that he should seek an interview with Ninon at that hour, and a singular smile flitted across the Malay's face while he studied the house beyond whose door Louis had passed.

"He has taken up the trail," said he. "He and Ninon are working together for Lisperard's salvation. They think they can twist the young man out of the toils. The girl has probably repented of her hasty words. She should have held her tongue. She might have known that the detectives would use her words against her. They can't do anything. The boy sleuth-hound without the old fox's advice is almost powerless. It needs but little action to render him entirely so."

Captain Nantes gave his mustache a little extra attention and went away.

Not long afterward he turned up in Isis Grabame's parlor, and had the deep, glowing eyes of the English widow fixed upon him.

"Where's your maid?" suddenly asked Captain Nantes.

"Asleep in her room," was the reply.

"When did she come in?"

"She has not been out."

The French-Malay smiled.

"You don't believe me?" exclaimed Isis, suddenly coloring.

"I never dispute your word; but, by Jove! I saw a dark figure on my track, and once or twice I thought I heard a step."

"Imagination!" laughed Isis. "But let me convince you."

Captain Nantes followed Isis out into the hall and thence up the staircase to the landing above.

Among the shadows there he had, on several occasions, seen a figure which always reminded him of a tigress in wait; but now there was nothing there.

Isis led her friend down the corridor to a certain door which yielded to her without noise, and the two entered a room on tip-toe.

At this hour a full moon hung over the sleeping city, and its beams of silvery brightness came in at the window, flooding for some distance, the carpet on the floor.

Isis advanced to a bed which stood half in the moonlight. She parted the lace curtains with her jeweled hand, and looked over her shoulder in triumph at Captain Nantes.

"What say you now?" her eyes seemed to ask.

Already the captain was looking at the object before him.

He saw on the pillow the dark and beautiful face of Deejeah.

The girl appeared to be fast asleep; her bosom rose and fell naturally; and the sight was enough to dissipate the Malay's doubts.

He gazed a moment and fell back, and Isis, dropping the curtain, followed his example.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked, touching his arm as they went down-stairs.

"I ought to be, don't you think?" he grinned; but still there seemed to linger a doubt.

"She's been in all evening."

"Excepting when she was out," mentally said Captain Nantes.

At the foot of the steps Isis, after looking narrowly at her visitor for a moment, said:

"I think you ought to tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Why you fear Deejeah!"

Captain Nantes looked up as if he expected to see the figure of the Indian girl at the summit of the balustrade.

"If it's a sworn secret, don't divulge it," continued Isis.

"It is not a secret. I'm the suspected one," was the answer.

"The suspected one?" echoed Isis.

"Yes."

"I don't understand."

"Deejeah is wrapped up in her people and their dark religion. She is the child of a priest of Vishnu. She knows something of the great plot that failed because there were traitors in it. She has doubtless sworn to hunt down some one concerned in the plot. She may carry one of those consecrated daggers with whose dark work you must be familiar. Deejeah, though your maid, does not dream that you belonged to the Coiled Cobra; therefore, I am the suspect. Somehow or other she has ferreted me out, and that is why she watches me like a tigress. Now you know why I fear her, for I cannot help it. I've been through some desperate adventures. I have never shirked my duty, no matter what it has been; but, by heavens! I don't like to know that I am watched—ay, hunted, by a beautiful fanatic with tiger eyes and nerves of steel. Put yourself in my place. The twisted daggers of Thuggee know no mercy. They seem to have an eye in the very point, for they never have to strike twice. She may not have been out to-night; but a cunning woman can't be trusted at any time."

"I'll watch Deejeah," said Isis.

"She'll keep you busy," smiled Captain Nantes. "I shall look out for her myself. I don't propose to have a tigress from Calcutta sneaking after me here in New York. If I

turn on her some day—if I convince her that she tracks the wrong person—you must not fault me, madam."

Isis made no reply.

"With one fox caged, and the other being looked after, I think the Coiled Cobra is on top, eh?" resumed Nantes.

"It is! I shall see Lisa to-morrow. The detective did not get anything out of the girl."

"Nothing?" cried Captain Nantes, giving Isis a quick, strange look. "Madam, do you know who rescued Old Cormorant from Madam Medusa's den?"

"Not Lisa, surely?"

"Lisa!"

"Impossible!"

"It is true! You won't see the girl to-morrow. She has been seen by another!" and Captain Nantes opened the door, and touched his hat to the Queen of the Coiled Cobra before she could reply.

"Lisa treacherous?" exclaimed Isis. "I thought the girl wholly in my power. She loves Captain Nantes. He drew her from Paris to America. I had convinced her that I was not her rival, and thus I thought she was my slave. Treacherous, he calls her. I will not see her to-morrow. I know what his words mean. He has paid Lisa for her folly!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FOX'S ESCAPE.

THIS time, or, when Captain Nantes walked from the handsome home of Isis Grabame, he did not have the shadowy Indian girl at his heels.

Half an hour later he unlocked the door of a plain-looking frame house in a certain quarter of the city, and entered, locking the portal behind him.

He ascended a flight of uncarpeted steps to a room whose dimensions could not be seen on account of the darkness that prevailed. But the captain in a short time had produced a light, which showed that he had returned to the place where he had sprung the fatal trap upon Old Cormorant.

The apartment was almost destitute of furniture, showing that the house was not regularly inhabited. It looked like a pitfall of some kind, or the abode of some person who desired to keep in hiding.

The French-Malay advanced to the middle of the room, and with the assistance of the point of his knife opened a trap-door in the floor.

This door did not seem to have any connection with the trap through which the trailer of the Unknown Hand had fallen.

Captain Nantes first put an ear at the little opening and listened.

No sounds came up from below.

"He couldn't be quieter if he were dead!" said the Malay, with a knowing smile. "He went down into the dark like a bullet. I never sprung a neater trap nor did a cleaner job."

As if listening at the opening in the floor had not satisfied him, Nantes rose and went to the rope.

He pulled it down until the large trap-door opened, when he fastened the cord to a nail.

Now he took from beneath his coat a small dark-lantern, whose light he sent down into the gloom beneath the floor.

"What is that?" exclaimed the Malay, suddenly drawing back. "Let me have ten minutes and I will know."

He made fast his light to the belt at his waist, then he found another rope, one end of which he secured to a stationary object, throwing the rest of the line into the gaping pit.

Three minutes afterward, Captain Nantes lowered himself into the gloom and began to descend hand over hand.

In a moment he was out of sight.

The distance to the bottom of the pit was not great, and the brother of the Coiled Cobra was not long reaching it.

He stepped back from his line and threw the light of his bull's-eye around him.

"Not here for a thousand!" he cried. "The devil helped his own, and Old Cormorant is a live fox out of a trap."

Captain Nantes subjected the old cellar to a rapid examination. His light penetrated every corner. Nothing escaped his eye.

"It was here!" said he, taking out several very loose stones. "Captain Cormorant must have turned in the air like a cat. He seemed to shoot downward nearly headforemost, but the flagging shows no blood. He wasn't hurt by the tumble."

By this time the Malay's lantern was sending its rays into the depths of the narrow sewer-like passage which the removal of the stones had revealed.

To him it was Old Cormorant's way to freedom.

Captain Nantes seemed eager to enter, but something held him back.

"Why look for a fox after he has slipped out of the snare?" he asked himself. "I might creep in there and find the vent; but Captain Cormorant would not be there. I'll look for him elsewhere. He has escaped twice, miraculously. The third time seals his doom! The

Coiled Cobra can kill in America as it silenced in India. The oath taken in the old temple included the silencing of just such scent-hounds as him. The third time means death, Captain Cormorant! Not by the trap-door, not by fire; but by the favorite agent of the Brotherhood of India—the poisoned sting of the transplanted cobra!"

He drew back and restored the stones to the wall; then went to the rope that dangled from the floor overhead and, with the agility of a sailor, climbed up hand over hand, and regained the room he had left.

During these scenes, the sharp ends of the captain's mustache had become disarranged; but a few dextrous passes had restored them to their former glory, and he left the house as jaunty in appearance as when he entered.

Old Cormorant had escaped! The old fox of the Bowery was at large again, and Captain Nantes knew what this meant.

He did not think of Louis now, and, for the time, he forgot Deeje, his dark-skinned enemy.

The Vidocq of the Bowery was the object of his thoughts. His mind worked with lightning rapidity as he stepped from stone to stone over the pavements of Gotham.

The coolest head with which the Coiled Cobra had ever dealt was at work once more. The man who had never lost a case had outwitted them the second time, and was still on the trail of the Unknown Hand!

Captain Nantes kept on the alert as he pursued his way.

He had to be on the lookout now.

"Watchfulness and swift, sure work!" said he. "That is the motto now. I could start Isis from her chair by a sentence. She believes that the fox is out of the way. I won't break the dream just yet. I may find him ere long and make amends for the accursed failure. Lisa is safe and silent. The dark tigress harbored by Isis has lost me for a spell. I must to work."

Yes, "the dark tigress," as he called Deeje, had lost him; but this event was not disturbing the Indian girl's mind.

She was no longer an occupant of the chamber to which we have seen Isis conduct Captain Nantes in order to convince him that Deeje, sound asleep, could not have been tracking him from street to street.

She stood in the sumptuous parlor face to face with the Queen of the Mystic League, Isis having called her down by the tinkling of a silver bell above her pillow.

There was a look of eager curiosity on the widow's face, one of wonder in Deeje's eyes.

"You don't like my friend, the captain?" said Isis, watching the girl closely.

Deeje gave a slight start.

"Who says so, mistress?" she asked.

"Ah! it is not hard for one to see some things."

"I don't like him!"

The four words came from the Indian girl like the snapping of pistol-caps.

Isis saw her hand shut vengefully while she spoke.

"Why don't you like him?"

"He hates my people."

"But he is far from India now."

"Nevertheless, his hate is the same. He belonged to the Brotherhood."

"To what Brotherhood?"

"The Coiled Cobra!"

"Don't misjudge him, Deeje."

"Not for all the wealth of India!" cried Deeje. "I would not break my oath by misjudging any one."

"Your oath, girl?"

Deeje made no reply.

"Go on," said Isis, in tones bordering on a command.

"Let Deeje keep her tongue still," answered the girl. "Oaths taken at the shrine of Vishnu are sacred. My mistress knows this. She has been among my people. Deeje is the child of a priest."

"I know that; but I did not know that I was bringing to this country one who wanted the blood of my friend."

"He should have kept out of the Brotherhood!" flashed the girl.

"He was not alone."

"Not alone!" repeated Deeje. "We will find all of them in time."

"We?"

"The Children of the Twisted Dagger!" was the response.

"Are you one?"

One of Deeje's hands disappeared in her bosom and the following moment Isis fell back from the sight that suddenly met her gaze.

A naked dagger—the blade curiously twisted like a Malay creese—lay on Deeje's dark palm.

Perhaps at that moment Isis thought of herself and of her own connection with the Coiled Cobra. She wondered if the child of the Twisted Dagger suspected her, if the keen eyes of her maid had ever seen the device of the gibbeted heart on her arm.

"So you are one of them?" said Isis, quietly looking into the girl's face.

"This is answer enough!" And the hand and the dagger came forward.

"You are to hunt down the brethren, are you, Deeje?"

"Such is Deeje's vow."

"Where did you take it?"

"In India."

"When?"

"A week before madam engaged me."

"Captain Nantes may be the wrong man."

"The French-Malay is the right man!" persisted the girl. "That is why he is hated."

"But you are in my employ!" cried Isis.

"You must not obey the dark commands of your gods to the harming of my friends."

"Were my mistress a member of the Coiled Cobra—and there were women in the plot—the Twisted Dagger would find her in time!"

"You are mad, Deeje!"

"No! Deeje is nothing but one of the children of Vishnu."

"You must not touch a friend of mine. Captain Nantes must not feel the point of your fanatical dagger."

The eyes of the Indian girl seemed to get a new gleam at this prohibition. She fell back from Isis, and suddenly wrapped her fingers about the dagger's hilt.

"The commands of Vishnu first!" cried she.

"The Coiled Cobra is to disappear before the consecrated daggers of the chosen ones! No person must stand between Deeje and the man who has been marked. None of the Coiled Cobra can escape. Some have fallen in India; others have perished in the New World. They go down one by one; but none die before the chosen time. They may have taken from their bosoms and from their arms the sign of the Cobra; but the silent huntresses of India find them all the same! Deeje loves her mistress; but she loves Vishnu more!"

And with the last word the twisted blade was replaced beneath the folds of her dark habit, and, with stately step, she walked from the room, leaving Isis in a maze of wonder.

"Captain Nantes is right. I harbor a tigress!" exclaimed the Queen of the Cobra League. "What if the girl should steal into my chamber some night and bare my arm? I dare not think of this! I made her unmask herself. It was a good play of mine. She is more dangerous than the old detective was. I know what a consecrated Indian dagger means!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

EYE TO EYE.

THERE had now come over the beautiful tenant of the mansion on the avenue an absolute fear of the girl, Deeje.

Isis saw her dark-skinned maid in a new light; saw and dreaded her.

For the Queen of the Coiled Cobra there was no sleep that night.

She occupied an arm-chair in the little room separated from the parlor by a rich arras, and her eyes did not for a moment close.

Toward morning Isis heard a footfall come down the stairs.

She recognized it as Deeje's subtle tread.

Springing erect, Isis clutched the hilt of a dagger, and half-hid herself among the folds of the curtains.

With watchful eyes and bated breath, she waited for the coming of the Child of the Twisted Dagger.

But Deeje did not come.

In a short time she heard a door open and shut softly.

"She has gone out!" exclaimed Isis, letting slip a breath she had held a long time. "She is after her sworn victim, Captain Nantes. I must do something against the new danger. I must be met in a manner that will break the spell. There is no telling to what lengths this fanatical girl will go. She knows nothing but blind obedience to the commands of the heathen priesthood. Captain Nantes is not to die, she says, until the appointed time. That time may have come."

Isis looked at the clock that ticked time away on the mantel, and saw that she had passed nearly the whole night in the chair, and in the shadow of the twisted blade.

In another hour the long arrows of a new day would touch the spires of New York, and the great city would be astir once more.

Isis retired to her private chamber and put on a habit which would effectually disguise her against the sharpest eyes.

A few moments after this she was abroad on the streets, flitting like a ghost through the cool air of the morning, and keeping where the densest shadows lay.

The Queen of the Coiled Cobra did not attempt to follow Deeje.

She left one street for another until she reached a certain house whose bell she rung with an emphasis which betrayed her haste.

She was admitted by a sleepy looking janitor who seemed surprised to see her at the door at that hour, but he said nothing.

"The captain!" said Isis in inquisitive tones.

"Go up and see."

She went up the steps that presented themselves and rapped at a door near the top.

She got no answer.

Suddenly she sought the knob and gave it a

sharp twist. The door yielded and Isis walked in.

By this time it was light, and the whole interior of the room was visible.

The first object Isis saw was a man apparently sound asleep in an arm-chair near a table that stood in the middle of the apartment.

The sight drew a horrified cry from the woman's throat.

She went forward and looked into the face that was turned toward the windows where the light was strongest.

It was the face of Captain Nantes.

Isis saw the sallow skin of the Malay surmounted by the dark mustache which claimed so much of his time.

"Not dead as I feared!" exclaimed the woman.

"I thought the girl had got here before me."

Then she clutched Captain Nantes's arm and shook him vigorously.

His was a deep slumber, but she broke it, and, in a short time, the French-Malay was staring at her as if he had discovered before him the creation of some horrible dream.

"You wouldn't have heard her if she had come!" exclaimed Isis. "In heaven's name, what threw you into a sleep like that? It was the counterfeit of death."

Captain Nantes smiled.

"I was tired, very tired," said he.

"You must have been. You did not take the trouble to undress, nor to lock your door."

"What! wasn't it locked?"

"It was not."

"What could I have been thinking about when I came in?"

"Not about your own safety, surely," was the reply.

"No, I was not. But what brings you hither?"

"I want advice, and, then, I came also to warn you."

"First the advice; the warning can wait."

"Who relieved you of the sign?"

Captain Nantes gave Isis a singular look.

"What! do you want to lose yours?" he asked.

"I do. I want the tattoo taken from my arm as soon as possible. Who came to your assistance?"

"A man named Ixion."

"Can he do it?"

"He never fails."

"Where will I find him?"

Captain Nantes gave Isis the tattooer's address.

"Something startling has rendered you so eager to lose the mark," said he.

"Ay, something startling. You must be on your guard. The huntress of the Vishnu priesthood is on your track."

"On mine, did you say?"

"Yes."

"Why not on yours as well?"

"As yet, she has not discovered me."

"You are afraid that she may see your arm, eh?"

"I am."

"You need not name the huntress to me," replied Captain Nantes, smiling. "I knew her. You call her Deeje." "

"I have called her thus, but now, unmasked, she is the Child of the Twisted Dagger."

Isis proceeded and detailed her whole interview with the Indian girl.

"Where is she now?" asked Captain Nantes.

"Somewhere abroad."

"After me, eh?"

"Perhaps."

The French-Malay was on his feet.

"Another to meet; that is all!" exclaimed he.

"I have known that this dark-skinned girl who slips in and out of Neejar's Temple is a devotee of Vishnu; but I did not think of her being one of the sworn huntresses of the East. On my track? I know that. I've seen enough to read her aright on that score. Don't dismiss her. Let her come and go. It won't be long. I promise you this."

"But I will see, Ixion."

"See him. He will make your flesh as clear as a babe's."

"He does not know me."

"If he did, you could trust him."

"When should I see him?"

"As soon as possible. The tattooer has few morning visitors. They generally seek him under cover of night."

Isis arose to depart.

"How fares the man in the toils?" she asked.

"Lispenard?"

"Lispenard."

"The web is too strong for the fly!" said Captain Nantes.

"Ninon has doomed him beyond recovery. Her tongue could not keep its secret. The shadow of doom is about him; but—"

Captain Nantes caught himself on the verge of a disclosure which he did not intend to make.

It was not time for Isis to know that Old Cormorant had escaped from the dungeon trap.

Without revealing his secret, the French-Malay saw the woman take her departure.

"I must do better than that," he muttered, glancing at the door. "No more sleeping with the way open for that velvet-footed tigress from

the shadows of the jungle. I'm glad Isis has her eyes open at last. She has been living at the mouth of a volcano ever since she took Deeje into her employ. The wonder is that the Indian girl did not suspect. But she knows me and the part I took in the plot of the Coiled Cobra, hence her secret work, her shadowing and her hatred of me. It is now a neck-and-neck race between Old Cormorant and Deeje, ha, ha! Well, I will halt them both. Morillo Nantes has been hunted long enough. He is hunter now!"

The sharp ends of the black mustache were made sharper, and the man of many plots went out to adventures as thrilling as they were unforeseen.

Meantime, Isis, hurrying through the lights and shadows of early dawn, was nearing Ixion's quaint abode.

She had been so well directed by Captain Nantes that, though she seldom found her way into that part of the city, she did not have to make further inquiry.

At last she reached the open hallway from which the ascent to the tattooer's room was easy.

Isis threw a scorching glance up and down the street and plunged in.

To her the sounds of her feet on the bare steps seemed to echo in her heart.

She found at the top of the flight a door bearing the legend well known to many:

"IXION, TATTOOER."

The Queen of the Indian League advanced and seized the knob that seemed to welcome her.

At this early hour the tattooer could have no customers, and this thought dissipated the woman's fears.

Turning the knob, she opened the door.

The next second she found herself face to face with Ixion—and a visitor!

She saw in a chair near the tattooer's workbench a small man with bright black eyes, a clean-shaven face, and rather swarthy skin.

He sent a nameless thrill through Isis.

Although she had never seen him before in this garb, she had not forgotten the eyes. She recalled the late visit to her house of Nicholas Ningen, the so-called jeweler—the man to whom she had exhibited the Indian bracelet.

In a flash his true identity came to the Queen of the Coiled Cobra.

She saw Nicholas Ningen in his right garb.

He was Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow!

For half a second the eyes of Ixion's companion met the woman's look.

They seemed to pierce her through.

"I won't keep the lady waiting," said Old Cormorant, quitting his chair and bowing to Isis. "Her errand is more important than mine. I can wait." And he passed the Cobra Queen with another look, and vanished before Isis could speak.

"What is it, madam?" asked the voice of Ixion.

Isis started forward like a person suddenly aroused.

Her face had lost every vestige of natural color.

She thought only of the man who had just gone out, for she knew that the dreaded shadow of New York had escaped from Captain Nantes, and that she had seen him face to face.

Ixion watched her with a half smile at the corners of his mouth.

He seemed to read her very thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SHADOW AT WORK.

"HA! I know you!" mentally exclaimed Ixion. "You are the beautiful passenger of the *Voltican*. You are the friend of the other passenger whom Judas and I used to catch playing Malay in his state-room. You have come to give me some work in my line; but finding Old Cormorant here has disconcerted you."

Yes, the unexpected discovery had disconcerted Isis.

"If I give Ixion work, will not the city fox come back and find it out?" thought she. "Captain Nantes says he can keep a secret. I won't trust him until we have dealt with the detective. I've no job for you to day, Ixion."

Isis then told the tattooer that she had called in the interest of a young friend who wished some work done.

Ixion bowed and smiled. He would be glad to see the person at any time, and, if his visitor would name a day, he would call at the house, or receive her in his own room.

Isis, in reply, said that she could not name a day without consultation; that she had called for the purpose of seeing whether he would undertake the work; nothing more.

Five minutes later Ixion, the tattooer, was alone again.

"Captain Cormorant has lost me a job!" he laughed. "Isis has no friend who wants work done. She was the real customer but she would not trust me because she found the detective here. Now, I will have Old Cormorant back in a minute."

Ixion did not shoot wide of the mark.

In a little while footsteps came up the stair,

the door opened and Old Cormorant stood before him.

"Isis?" queried the detective, as he crossed the room.

"Isis," repeated Ixion.

"What did she want?"

"She called to consult me about doing some work for a friend."

The detective smiled.

"A friend?" he echoed. "She meant herself."

"I think so."

"A glimpse of me changed all her plans," continued the detective. "She did not expect to find me here. The fair passenger of your vessel—the woman who played Malay in her state-room—wants something removed from her arm."

Ixion gave Old Cormorant a quick look.

"Do you think she was one of them?" he asked.

"I do! Give me time and I will prove it. The Unknown Hand is nearly out of the shadows, Ixion. Isis of India is playing a deep game. She and Captain Nantes are the weavers of the web which holds young Lispenard in thrall."

"It wasn't for money!" cried the tattooer, grasping at the detective's meaning.

"Not for money," was the reply. "You have told me that treason to the Coiled Cobra was punishable with death."

"It was."

"You took from the breast of Lispenard, senior, the sign of the gibetted heart?"

"I did."

"Not long afterward the banker was found dead—killed in his room!"

The tattooer did not speak for a moment.

"I see now," he exclaimed at length. "Lispenard was killed by some enemy."

"By the avenger of supposed desertion or treason," answered Old Cormorant.

"But Madam Medusa? You have been devoting yourself to the mystery which surrounds her death."

"So I have, but, as I have told Louis, the two trails have come together."

"Did Madam Medusa ever belong to the Coiled Cobra?"

"I think not."

"Then, why was she killed by the same kind of blow that sent Lot Lispenard out of the world?"

"She knew something."

"Killed because she held the secret of some life?" cried Ixion.

"Yes. But let us drift back to your visitor—to Isis. She won't bring you the friend she spoke of. That person does not exist. I frightened her out of the real business of her visit; that is all. To her I was as a person back from the dead. I took her breath; but I left quickly, so as to give her time to recover. She is shrewd, dangerous and deep."

"But not too deep for you, eh?"

"I hope not."

Old Cormorant soon found his way back to the little room he had not entered since his escape from the dangerous trap of Captain Nantes.

He found no one there.

Louis had evidently given up hopes of seeing him soon, for he had left no letter in the secret niche in the wall, and the detective did not get to exchange notes with the young man.

"Now for the Lispenard mystery for a short time," said he. "There is one link I want to pick up. Ninon can supply it if she will. She won't have to compromise her lover, either; but she may refuse to help me as I would like."

Old Cormorant left the Bowery quarters, and not long afterward appeared at the door of the Lispenard mansion.

He was admitted to the parlor, and soon stood in Ninon's presence.

Why did the beautiful girl look at him so sharply?

Did she suspect that he was the celebrated shadow of the Bowery?

Old Cormorant soon broke the ice.

He told her his name and his mission.

"All I know is yours!" exclaimed Ninon.

"Louis was here last night. He told me about his wild adventures at Neejar's Temple; how he found a strange packet in Vishnu's lap; how he was followed from Ixion's, and robbed on the street—"

"By whom?" interrupted Old Cormorant.

"We believe by Neejar himself!" cried Ninon.

"A wary old fox," smiled the detective. "I will not bother you for the story; but I'll make Louis detail it when we meet again. I want to ask but two questions."

"Well?"

"Did you ever see this enemy of whom Lispenard seemed to be afraid?"

"I never did," answered Ninon, promptly.

"He feared some one, did he?"

"He did."

"Even after he had lost his tattoo?"

Ninon started.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed.

"This: Lispenard, the dead, belonged to a secret league in India. I don't know by whom he was induced to join, nor why he entered into the

terrible compact. But he was one of them. He had removed from his breast, not long before the blow came, the tattoo of the Order—a gibbeted heart—

"The crest of the ring Louis found in the idol's lap!" broke in Ninon.

"Ah! his ring, no doubt! Did I not say a while ago that Neejar is a sly old fox?"

"Why didn't he give it up? It was for the ring that Lloyd went to the temple with the message that fatal night. He came back empty-handed."

"Neejar knew his game. The Coiled Cobra League was against the sacred religion of India; therefore, the devotees of Vishnu are against the League. Old Neejar withheld the ring for a purpose."

"What was his purpose?"

"Ah! that is one of the missing links!" exclaimed Old Cormorant. "Now, let me ask the second question, Ninon."

"Go on."

"What has become of the maid who gave evidence which helped to lead to young Mr. Lispenard's arrest?"

"I cannot tell you. She is no longer here."

"When did she go away?"

"Just after the arrest."

"How long had she been in your employ?"

"Nearly a month. She was not with us all the time. She would be absent at intervals during the day, and always at night."

"What did you call her?"

"Julie."

"Was she pretty?"

"Not really beautiful, but Julie had a nice face and a good figure."

"Give me a picture of her."

Ninon described her late maid with a fidelity that seemed to please Old Cormorant.

"Julie was not American," said Ninon. "She had an accent that betrayed her. She was part French."

"Another link and a very important one," said the Bowery Shadow to himself, when he had left the Lispenard mansion and was some squares away. "I got this idea into my head while I was in Captain Nantes's dungeon. Julie had another name even while she was in Ninon's service. It was Lisa!"

But where was Lisa at that moment?

The French girl had disappeared as though the earth had opened and engulfed her. The detective knew that she had not written the letter which had decoyed him to the old house and into the trap operated by Captain Nantes. She had betrayed the French-Malay to him; she had broken the web which had caught her; but she had refused to betray Isis in any manner.

He had proof that she knew the Queen of the Coiled Cobra, that she had served Isis in some way; but Lisa had kept that secret from him.

Now, if Julie and Lisa were the same person, and Ninon's description of her lost maid seemed to render certain this belief, he would soon complete the chain of crime.

He must hunt again for Lisa.

"I must find the French girl," said he. "She holds the secret. She knows who came to the Lispenard mansion that night. She crossed the millionaire's step for a purpose. Lisa was the dupe of Queen Isis. Some terrible oath bound her to the woman of the avenue—an oath which she would not break for me. She could betray Captain Nantes, because her love for him had turned to hatred; but she repulsed me when I talked of Isis. I want you, Lisa; this time more than ever before."

Old Cormorant began his search at once, but the trail was cold.

Lisa Dubarre had vanished so completely that not a trace of her remained to give him hope.

Night found the detective of the Bowery still after the missing quarry.

He went to the little Park where he had twice met the French maid.

She might be looking for him as before, if she had not been dealt with for breaking the web.

Old Cormorant found no one on the spot where he had encountered Lisa.

He lingered there until the hour grew late, and as he turned away he saw cross a lighted spot the gliding figure of a woman.

Just beyond the light it stopped and stood still, and the detective saw that a pair of blazing eyes in the figure's head were watching some one.

"Aha! Deejeah again!" exclaimed Old Cormorant, and following her eyes, he saw the form of a man moving slowly down one of the paths.

Of course it was Captain Nantes!

CHAPTER XXV.

PLOTTER AND PRIEST.

THE French-Malay did not seem to dream that he was again in the shadow of the Twisted Dagger.

He moved away watched by the Indian girl who, totally unconscious of the detective's presence, watched him like a hawk.

It was amusement for Old Cormorant, and he kept both Deejeah and Captain Nantes in sight until the latter, by a quick movement which the girl was not expecting, sprung among some shadows and vanished.

"The appointed time has not yet come. I don't want him to-night," said Deejeah aloud, quitting her place and coming toward the shadow. "I was only watching the yellow viper. When Vishnu wants him he will be found!" And, with the last word dying on her lips, she passed Old Cormorant and disappeared.

"She can go back to Isis, or seek Neejar's shrine—I care not which," muttered the detective. "Captain Nantes interests me most just now."

He crossed a portion of the Square and coming out where the shadows were fewer caught sight of the very man he sought.

There was now no doubt that Nantes had seen Deejeah on duty.

The manner in which the Malay pointed his mustache with his silken fingers, and the triumphant looks that he sent toward the spot where the girl had been seen, were proof enough that she had not escaped his vigilant eyes.

He had outwitted her; that was all. He had eluded the Child of the Twisted Dagger, but with the hope that they would meet again under circumstances of his own choosing.

If he had discovered Deejeah he had not seen Old Cormorant.

He did not know that the man who had escaped from the dungeon trap was at that very moment within a few feet of where he stood, studying him with the keenness of the true trailer.

Captain Nantes started off at last with an inward chuckle over the success he had just scored with the Indian girl.

He was followed.

Whether or not Old Cormorant expected him to solve the mystery which just then enveloped Lisa, he had the detective in his wake. When he looked back, as he sometimes did, he did not see any one who roused suspicion; but the shadow was there all the same.

Captain Nantes did not go to the house of the trap, neither did he take the Man of the Bowery to the carved doors of the woman's house on the avenue.

He went with few deviations to another house, nearly as well-known to the reader—Neejar's!

Old Cormorant could not at first believe his eyes when they showed him Captain Nantes at the door of the Indian temple.

If Deejeah was against him, how could Neejar be his friend, especially since the Coiled Cobra League had plotted against the sacred shrines of India?

The old detective could not guess the purport of Captain Nantes's visit to the dark-skinned priest.

He saw the door open in response to the French-Malay's raps and then the man himself disappeared beyond the threshold.

"I don't understand this; I confess I don't," said Old Cormorant. "It wouldn't do for me to follow Captain Nantes into the temple. I don't want to confront him yet—not until I have the chain nearly finished. I must leave him alone with my friend Neejar."

If he could have entered the Indian's house at the Malay's heels, he would have seen the old Brahmin eye him with an interest that bordered on ferocity.

It was apparent that the captain's visit was a puzzle to Neejar; but it was just as apparent that the priest had recognized him.

In the dim light in the hall beyond the door, Neejar looked at Captain Nantes, and waited for him to speak.

The old Indian now wore the long white robe in which he officiated before the idol in the shrine room. He looked in it like a different person from the naked figure with which Louis had fought in the gloom; but the eyes were the same, had the same malignant gleam, and the slender hands that hung at his sides were the very ones which had almost throttled Old Cormorant's pupil.

"Good-night, Neejar," said Captain Nantes, breaking the silence amid which he had entered the house.

The Indian replied with a slight bow.

"You don't know me, eh? I don't come often," continued the Malay.

"Neejar is not required to know all who come to his house," was the answer.

"But you don't admit any person whom you don't want on the inside. You study them by means of your door-slide, and if you don't want them here, they don't get in."

There was a tinge of insolence in the speaker's tones, but the Indian did not seem to notice it.

"Do you see your visitors here?" asked Nantes, throwing a swift glance about the corridor.

"No."

Neejar turned quickly and opened a door at the Malay's left.

"Come," said he, looking over his shoulder, and the captain followed him into a small room the scene of the young detective's adventure.

Neejar shut the door behind him, and the next moment touched a match to a burner near the wall, and relieved the gloom with a bit of light.

"Neejar will listen now," said he. "What does his brother want?"

Captain Nantes did not like the Indian's tart-

ness; but, as he had come to the place on important business, he had decided that it would not do to attempt to carry things with a high hand. Perhaps he knew the power and the characteristics of the man who faced him, as much like a jungle tiger as a human being.

"Neejar, I want to know why a man like me must be dogged by one of your people—by a spy who has the velvet tread of a Bengal tigress."

These words did not cause the slightest flurry. Captain Nantes had fired them deliberately and point-blank at the Indian priest; but he had not stirred.

"You know me, Neejar," continued the Malay. "We have met before to-night, and not in this country, either. You have not forgotten the man, who, at the risk of his own life, saved a certain priest of Vishnu from a man-eater of the jungle."

"Neejar forgets nothing."

"I thought you would not forget that. You told me then that the day would come when you could repay me for my assistance. With uplifted hands in the moonlight, and over the bleeding body of the tiger, you swore by the sacred eyes of Vishnu that you would remember the man who had saved your life."

"Neejar remembers!"

"Good!" cried Captain Nantes. "I have come to remind you of that pledge. Not that I fear any living being—not that I am not able to take care of myself, but because I don't want to shed the blood of one of your race."

Old Neejar, the priest, seemed to draw off and look at Captain Nantes.

Was this the man who had been one of the leading spirits of the infamous plots of the Coiled Cobra League, which, if successful, would have shed the blood of the very Indian priests at the altars? Old Neejar must have wondered when the tiger had grown merciful.

"Who dogs my brother's footsteps?" he quickly asked.

"One of your people. She tracks me with the pertinacity of a bloodhound. Not an hour ago I saw her in the shadows, watching me like a hawk."

"Let my brother name her."

"They call her Deejeah."

At mention of the name Neejar gave a slight start—the first since admitting the Malay into the temple.

"You know her?" resumed Captain Nantes.

"She comes hither."

"I know it! She is a child of Vishnu."

"A faithful child!" echoed the Indian priest.

"She has proclaimed that I am to die when a certain time has come."

"Why?"

"Heaven knows!" exclaimed the friend of Isis.

Old Neejar suddenly seized the captain's arm and dragged him toward the gas-jet.

"Open your coat!" exclaimed the Indian.

"Let Neejar see your bosom."

A smile lurked at the Malay's lips as he complied.

With dextrous fingers he opened his coat and exposed his flesh to the burning eyes of the old fanatic.

"Nothing there!" he heard Neejar say.

"Of course there's nothing there!" answered Captain Nantes. "But Deejeah hunts me all the same. As a priest of Vishnu, you can control the actions of those who worship here. I don't want to deal with one of your race—much less with a young girl like Deejeah. I have not, until this hour, reminded you of your oath over the carcass of the tiger."

"What does my brother want?"

"I want you to hold the tigress back. I don't want to be dogged from street to street—to walk, when I know it not, in the shadow of a mad girl's dagger. Neither do I want to be compelled to turn upon her and deprive Vishnu of one of his worshippers. Don't tell me that you are powerless, Neejar! I know the authority of the priests of Vishnu. It is as potent in New York over your own people as on the banks of the Ganges. Say to Deejeah: 'You must not!' and she will follow me no more."

There was no direct reply.

The Sphinx-like face of the Indian priest was a puzzle, as before.

"Give me an answer!" cried Captain Nantes.

"Will you desert the oath by the tiger?"

"No!" came from Neejar's lips. "A priest of Vishnu dare not forget a promise like that."

"And you will hold the girl back?"

"Neejar will see Deejeah when she comes."

"I thought you would grant my request?"

"The girl has made a mistake. There is nothing over my brother's heart. If there was—"

"What?" broke in Captain Nantes.

"If the accursed sign was there, a thousand Neejars could not keep Deejeah from her trail! But I will tell her. I will keep my compact with my brother, the captain."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SHADOW OF DOOM.

CAPTAIN NANTES came forth from Neejar's temple, feeling that he had scored a victory.

He had broken the dreaded power of the Child of the Twisted Dagger, for, having deceived the

Indian priest, he believed that Vishnu's servant would exercise his authority and remove Deeje from the trail.

This would leave him free to pay undivided attention to Old Cormorant.

He could now look after the shadow of the Bowery; he could also watch the movements of Louis, the young detective, and, with Deeje diverted from his trail, he would prove a match for both the master and his pupil.

"I have broken the accursed spell of the shadow!" exclaimed he when, an hour after his departure from Neejar's temple, he walked into Isis's presence and confronted that creature, as beautiful as ever, under her own roof.

The look he got in reply was a question.

"I stole a march on the devotee of the dagger!" continued Captain Nantes.

"How?" queried Isis.

"I forced old Neejar to recall a promise which he sealed with an oath."

"Well?"

"He is going to blunt the Twisted Dagger."

A smile appeared at the corners of the lips of the League Queen.

"He will find her first," said she.

"She will go to him. Deeje can worship nowhere in this city but under the old pagan's roof."

"But what if she suspects? What if she suspects your visit to Neejar?"

"How can she when, for once, I was not tracked?"

"The girl has left me."

Captain Nantes started. "Left you!" he repeated.

"Deeje is no longer in my employ," answered Isis, quietly. "I find certain articles missing from her room. They were there yesterday; they are gone now. I know what it means. The bird has taken flight."

The Malay did not speak for a moment.

"I don't know whither the girl would go," said he at length. "There are few people of her race in New York."

"Neejar knows them all."

"But he might not be willing to tell me."

"Well, let the girl go. She will turn up somewhere. If she goes to Neejar's to worship, the old priest may keep his word with you. If she should not go near, you will still have her to contend with."

Captain Nantes did not like such words; but he said nothing.

"Now, tell me how the fox got away," resumed Isis.

"The fox?"

"Captain Cormorant."

"When did you see him?"

"When I went to Ixion's."

"Was he there?"

"He was there."

"Did he appear to recognize you?"

"He did. He don't carry his eyes in his head for nothing."

"Tell me all."

Isis proceeded and detailed for her visitor's benefit her visit to the tattooer's, her encounter with Old Cormorant there, and her story by which she thought she had not betrayed to Ixion the real motive of her call.

"I saw in his head the same eyes I saw in Nicholas Ningen's," finished Isis. "The pretended bracelet-mender and Old Cormorant are one and the same person. I knew it the moment I saw the sleuth-hound with Ixion. That man is a hunter."

"Ay, that he is."

"What was the matter with your trap?"

"It did not hold him."

"Who helped him out?"

"No one."

"I can set a better trap than that!" cried Isis derisively.

Captain Nantes fiercely pointed his mustache.

"Set it then!" he exclaimed madly.

For a moment the eyes of the two schemers met in baughty challenge, Isis's from the depths of her chair, the Malay's from some distance Queen above her.

"Do you give me the trail?" exclaimed the Queen of the Cobra League.

The handsome captain was still in ill-humor.

"Take it!" said he. "By Jove! I'm glad to get this thing off my hands. Set your trap and catch the fox."

"If I do, I'll hold him!" was the response.

Captain Nantes regarded Isis with a smile.

He did not seem to believe her more than half in earnest.

She left her chair and disappeared beyond the curtains which separated the parlor from the little chamber into which we have looked on several occasions.

"I'm curious to know what she'll do," mused Nantes. "She could sway the whole Cobra League across the seas. She was a match for the keenest of Indian spies, and, if we had not been betrayed, she would have carried the whole scheme to success. If she sets a trap—if she pits her cunning against yours, Old Cormorant—look out! Isis of India is as dangerous as beautiful. Born in Egypt, in the shadow of the Pyramids, and raised on the banks of the Ganges, among the mystics of the East, she has the subtle cunning of the serpents of the two lands.

I've been associated with her a long time, yet I know her not. But I know this: I'm glad Queen Isis isn't going to set a trap for me!"

By this time the curtains of the chamber fell apart and Isis came forward.

Her countenance had undergone a change. It was now all resolution; the sparkling black eyes held mirrored in their depths a light which riveted the Malay's attention, and the hands were tightly clutched at their owner's sides.

"The master is mine!" said Isis. "If the pupil is worth looking after, take him! Or, if Deeje is still dangerous in your sight, give her a share of your attention."

Then she put forth one of her hands and Captain Nantes took from it a folded paper.

"Read it," continued the Queen of the Indian League.

The French-Malay opened the paper and read thereon the following sentence:

"Miss Isis Grahame of No. —, — Avenue, left on an early train this morning for the South, where she will sojourn an indefinite period."

Captain Nantes looked up from the paper with a puzzled expression.

"You will drop that announcement into the mail-box of the *Journal*, after midnight," remarked Isis, coming to his rescue.

The Malay bowed.

"I disappear to-night. This house will be shut up," she went on. "You may come here, but you will find no one. I don't intend to play an open hand against the fox who has outwitted you. It is now cunning against cunning. There is no telling how many links he has picked up, nor how adroitly he has joined them together. The vengeance of the League must not be succeeded by defeat. I sha'n't go back to Ixion. The sign can remain on my arm for awhile longer, at least. Deeje is no longer dangerously near with her keen eyes and her consecrated dagger. Let us begin the last work of the game. I have to prepare for my departure."

"Then you are really going?"

"What says the paper you hold in your hand?" exclaimed Isis.

"It tells me that you go South to-morrow."

"It will tell another the same thing!"

"I see!" ejaculated Captain Nantes.

"Do your duty. Drop the note as you have been commanded."

The following moment the Malay, standing in the hallway, was debating in his mind whether to bid Isis good-by or not.

He threw a furtive look up the staircase, but saw nothing. This time the supple figure and the gleaming eyes of Deeje were not among the shadows above. Their absence seemed to relieve him.

"Good-by, captain," suddenly said Isis, showing her teeth with a smile as she held forth her hand. "Don't trouble yourself about the Queen of the League, neither give yourself any uneasiness concerning the movements of the Bowery Shadow. I am on the trail. The Cobra has raised its head once more, and its strike will prove as effective in the New World as it did in the Old. I have discovered that the Lispenard in the toils is liable to remain there. They must produce the 'Unknown Hand,' as the newspapers call it, before the toils can be broken, and that they can never do. Captain Cormorant signed his death-warrant the moment he decided to unravel the Hester street mystery."

Captain Nantes, on the sidewalk once more, found the beautiful creature whom he had just left the sole object of his thoughts.

The hour was near midnight, and hurrying away, he reached a certain building some time after twelve had been struck.

Taking from its place of concealment the paper which Isis had intrusted to his care, he dropped it into an oblong opening in a closed door and having seen it disappear, started on again.

"It is her game, not mine!" muttered the captain. "I'm glad she's relieved me of this work. She will find the fox on the alert, and, unless she brings all her cunning into play, she will discover that he is the most dangerous man the League ever had to deal with. If she fails—if Isis is outwitted by Captain Cormorant—Morillo Nantes disappears like a bullet fired into the night."

The Malay turned into a narrow street near the newspaper office and soon afterward ascended a flight of steps to a room the interior of which he revealed with a match and some gas.

Home again!

When he was not "at work"—when the mysterious game which he and the Cobra's Queen were playing did not keep him elsewhere—he could be found within the four plain walls of the room which he never visited during the day-time.

Captain Nantes, the adventurer of two continents, had chosen the place in secret; he came thither only when unwatched, and when no enemy was in sight he would creep away to play his "hand" in other quarters.

On this occasion he speedily divested himself of his coat and threw himself into a chair.

But all at once he sprung up as if the door had suddenly opened, admitting the lithe figure of the Indian girl.

Captain Nantes had caught sight of something he had not seen before.

His eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets.

A bound took him half-way across the room, and then, trembling in his tracks, with a face of ghastly hue, he stared at the strange device on the white-washed wall before him.

It was nothing more nor less than a gibbeted heart, crowned by crossed arrows, and pierced through and through by a twisted dagger!

And over all was this inscription in Hindustani:

"The Time is at hand!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

OLD CORMORANT TALKS.

LOUIS, meanwhile, had been looking everywhere for Old Cormorant.

He was ignorant of the working of the Malay's trap, of the old detective's incarceration and subsequent escape; but at last he picked up at Ixion's certain information which led him to believe that the man of the Bowery would soon be found.

The young detective, since the strange robbery of which he was the victim—the recapture of the packet found in Vishnu's lap—had not ventured back to old Neejar's Temple.

He had settled down to the belief that the swarthy priest had recovered from the terrible choking administered in the dark room, and that it was Neejar's hand which had plundered him in turn.

This was also Ninon's belief, and the dead millionaire's word adjured him to keep away from the fanatic.

But for this Louis, in his desire to get even, would have played a hand which might have resulted disastrously to himself.

He encountered Old Cormorant at last.

The two met in the little room on the Bowery the night after the events detailed in the chapter before this.

Louis, coming in with faint hopes of finding the old Vidocq at home, saw his familiar figure in his arm-chair, and a bound carried him to his side.

"At last!" cried Louis, dropping his hand upon Old Cormorant's shoulder. "I've been ransacking New York for you."

The detective looked up with a faint smile. Old Cormorant was never demonstrative.

"Where's Colonel Lispenard's ring?" he asked.

Louis flushed.

"I guess you'll find it in the god's lap," said he. "Who told you I had it?"

"Ninon," answered Old Cormorant.

"Then, you have seen her? It was all over in a minute. I had lost the packet before I could take second breath. The dark tiger came and went like a whirlwind. I don't know why he spared me."

"The priests of Vishnu shed no blood," replied the Bowery Shadow. "The being who attacked you wanted nothing but the packet. He got it, and was satisfied."

"It is what he refused to surrender to Lispenard the night of the double crime."

"Yes; there now remains no doubt of it," said Old Cormorant. "But the restoration of the crested ring would not have saved the banker. He was doomed before that. The Unknown Hand was even then hovering over him, and the dagger of death was poised above his head. Look here, Louis."

The detective drew forth a paper which he opened and spread on the table.

His finger pointed to a certain paragraph which Louis read by leaning forward.

It informed him, in a few words, that Mrs. Isis Grahame, of —th avenue, had gone South for an indefinite period.

From the paper he looked at his friend, Old Cormorant.

"The English bird has sought a warmer climate," said the Bowery detective.

"When did she go?"

"At five this morning."

"By rail?"

"No, by steamer."

"Then, she has really left the city?"

Louis thought Old Cormorant nodded slightly.

"You seem interested in Isis," he remarked.

"I am. I am very much interested in the beautiful widow of the avenue," was the quick rejoinder. "She is the friend of Captain Nantes, the fellow who points his mustache like needles. Now that Isis has departed, what will the captain do? Will he set another trap for me, or will he disappear, like his mistress? Really, Louis, boy, I don't care what he does. I pick up another link now and then, and join it to the chain I already have."

"What has become of Lisa?" asked Louis.

The question caused a slight start.

"My shrewd French maid, eh?" exclaimed Old Cormorant.

"Yes."

"I—I don't know exactly where Lisa is just at this moment; but I hope she's not lost," was the answer.

"Then she is hiding still?"

"Hiding? Well, yes. I guess we'll call it that. At least, Lisa is bidden. She is either in one place alive, or in another dead."

"Dead?" cried Louis.

"Dead," smiled the Bowery detective. "The desperate girl thought she had broken through the web which held her. She discovered, when too late, that the spider which had infatuated her was only drinking her blood—that ere long she would lie in the meshes of the web, a forgotten fly. She turned on the spider when she could not crush him. She told me a good deal about Captain Nantes; but not a word about the other person."

"The 'other person?'" repeated Louis.

"About Isis."

"Did Lisa know much about the Indian widow?"

"She holds the one great secret of the game we have been engaged in!" cried Old Cormorant. "Let me find Lisa and I will open the tangle and separate all the threads. Do you recollect how you discovered Captain Nantes one night on the pier? how he climbed upon it from a boat and vanished?"

"I do."

"And for a while you thought him Lloyd Lispenard?"

"I did. The resemblance, especially after night, is very striking."

"Striking enough to deceive almost any one," said Old Cormorant. "Well, the cunning Malay was only making a false scent then. He went nowhere in particular. If you had not seen him by daylight afterward, you might have settled down to the belief that the person you saw at the pier was Lispenard, the man now in the toils."

Louis was silent. He did not like to admit that Old Cormorant was touching the truth.

"This yellow lynx knows where Lisa is," continued the Bowery Shadow without looking up at his interested auditor. "His hand, ready for anything, is deep in the play."

"Then, he suspects that the girl has betrayed him?"

"He knows it."

"That means death for Lisa!"

Old Cormorant was silent.

"You have her at one of two places," continued Louis. "Have you visited them?"

"I have not."

"But you will?"

"I will."

"When?"

"Before daylight."

Again the look of the man of the Bowery fell upon the newspaper which still lay open before him.

"Gone South!" the young shadow heard him say, like a man musing to himself. "I hope nobody has been hoodwinked by the little paragraph. It's a pretty card; but it won't win. I've seen sleek 'hands' before," and he folded the paper and dropped it into a drawer in the table.

Then he leaned back in his chair and told Louis about his last visit to Ixion; how he had suddenly encountered Isis there; how the Queen of the Cobra League had tried to hoodwink the tattooer with a well-spun story about her errand, and how both he and Ixion saw through her game.

"But she's dangerous," said Old Cormorant, laying his hand upon his companion's arm. "This beautiful creature is a tigress in velvet. She was that in India; she has resumed the garb in New York. There she was no less a person than the Queen of the celebrated Cobra League. The scheme originated in her brain. I have a little leather-bound book which tells me, in a foot-note, that a certain Englishman had two children born unto him on the banks of the Nile—that he called one Isis, the other Osiris. With the latter we have nothing to do. With the other we are dealing now. A creature who has lived among the serpents of Egypt and the tigers of India ought to be shrewd."

"I would think so," said Louis.

"Her career of conspiracy commenced with the death of her husband, the English officer," continued Old Cormorant. "She selected her victims with care and cunning. She formed the terrible League of the Coiled Cobra for a dark purpose. No native Indian was admitted. The time for action was near at hand; but all at once the shadow of treason fell across the plot. A heart weakened, a hand trembled. In a moment, as it were, the bubble of conspiracy burst. The whole native priesthood stood aghast, and was for a moment paralyzed. The traitor fled for his life. He was in hiding for years—hunted by the priests and by the daggers of the League. He put thousands of miles between him and Calcutta—finally ten thousand of them."

"He must have come to this country," said Louis.

"He did. He was an American before, and, in coming to our shores, he only came home."

"I understand," smiled the young detective. "You have been working at the Lispenard Mystery."

"I could not help it. Some time ago I told you that the two trails had come together. Lot Lispenard, the banker of the avenue—the envious millionaire, Ninon's guardian and Lloyd's father—was the hunted traitor of the Coiled Cobra League. He had Ixion remove from his breast the sign of the cabal. He knew that some one was on his track; he lived in the shadow of the avenging knife of the Cobra. He

asked Neejar to restore the crested ring, which, in a moment of blind folly, dazed by the eyes of the League's Queen, he had made in secret; but Neejar sent his messenger back empty-handed."

"You have not been idle!" exclaimed Louis. "As one who started out to find who killed an old fortune-teller on Hester street, you have discovered something about the murder on the avenue."

"By Jove! I couldn't keep it!" laughed Old Cormorant. "The dead gave me a clew which I could not cast aside."

"The dead?" echoed Louis.

"Yes, the dead. I found in Madam Medusa's chamber, the only time I was there, two things—a ruby, which had dropped from its setting, and a tiny box of wax. We won't say where the gem belongs; but I'll remark in passing that Captain Nantes points his mustache with the kind of wax found in the box. There was nothing found in the Lispenard mansion; no clew, I mean."

"Ninon and Lloyd say none."

"Then we must find Lisa," said Old Cormorant, with determination. "Lisa is the connecting link. I can restore the ruby to its nest; I can present Captain Nantes with his lost box; but the French maid must speak, if her lips are not forever silent."

"If they are—what?"

"Wait and see!" And, as Old Cormorant finished, a footfall, which even his keen ears did not catch, left the door on the outside and went down the steps.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

STILL IN THE WEB.

"THAT'S the work of the pagan tigress! Deejeh has been here! Either Neejar has not seen her, or the old scoundrel has broken his oath!"

These and similar exclamations fell from Captain Nantes's tongue while he glared at the device on his wall, and read for the twentieth time the startling inscription traced above it:

"The time is at hand."

There was no need of his asking what time. He knew without going to that trouble.

It meant the time of his death.

The hand of the huntress was raised above him as it were. The twisted dagger was about to drink his blood!

There was nothing to tell the French-Malay when the mystic work had been done. He had not visited the secret lodgings for three days, and at some hour during that time Deejeh had come and gone.

At first Captain Nantes thought of obliterating the work of the Indian artist; but the next second he had resolved to let it stand.

"I may want to put another inscription beneath it, and in the same language, too!" exclaimed he, talking, as it seemed, through clinched teeth. "I've met her ancestors in the jungles. Why should I fear the girl in Gotham?"

His terror now apparently fled, and he laughed at the device on the wall.

He seemed to forget that, a short time before, he had begged Neejar, the priest, to take the Child of the Twisted Dagger from his trail; that the very thought of the velvet-footed huntress had sent a chill through his blood.

He resumed his coat, and went toward the door with an eager step, and five minutes later the night had engulfed him.

The following day the twisted blade did not fall.

Captain Nantes returned to the room, found the strange picture still on the wall, laughed derisively at it once more, and went away again.

Night had once more fallen around the city, and, after his last visit to the apartment whose walls bore such an odd secret, he went down among the glowing lamps.

He made his way to a house not unlike the one in which he had set and sprung the trap on Old Cormorant.

He did not think of the Bowery Shadow now; he had turned him over to Isis, the League Queen, and her cunning would prove a match for his Vidocq acumen.

Captain Nantes unlocked the front door of the house and locked it behind him when he had entered.

Instead of climbing the staircase which invited him in the narrow hall, he passed to a door at the end of the corridor, opened it and disappeared.

If an owl could have looked after, or a bat followed Captain Nantes, he would have been seen to descend a flight of ten steps, landing on damp ground which gave out no noise of footfalls.

There was a stone wall on his right, like the wall of a cellar. His hand kept it for a guide as he plunged deeper and deeper into the gloom.

"I hear it!" suddenly exclaimed the adventurer. "I hear the swish of the river, almost as plainly as one hears it from the wharves. What a great place would this be to hide in! Deejeh could not find one here; neither could all the man-hounds of New York. I haven't spent my time doing nothing. This is one of my secrets. Ha! hear the old waves! Swish! swish! swish!"

The sounds mentioned by Captain Nantes were terribly audible ones.

The river seemed to be beating against the opposite side of the wall; but though the stones were loose not a drop of water came through.

At a certain point a few feet from the dungeon steps the Malay came to a halt. He put up his hands and found amid the gloom overhead a bar of iron.

Clutching it tightly he moved it to one side and opened a trap-door which was just out of reach.

But nothing daunted by this, Nantes caught its rim by raising himself by means of the stones, and, in another moment, he was in a comfortable looking little room whose only light was that furnished by the stars.

He crossed the apartment without closing the trap, passed into another room, whose door he unlocked, and then stood still.

"Who is there?" asked a voice in low tones.

Captain Nantes started.

The question was not put again.

Without reply, the Malay drew a lucifer across the wall and applied the flame to a gas-jet.

"I thought so!" exclaimed the same voice he had heard before, and looking over his shoulder he saw the speaker, a tall young woman, in the middle of the room.

"Of course it is I!" exclaimed the Malay. "Whom did you expect?"

There was no reply, and for a second eye met eye with a little space between them.

"You're still in the web, eh?" cried Captain Nantes, advancing a step toward the tenant of the chamber. "Why don't you get out?"

There was a taunt in every word that dropped from his tongue.

"You didn't break the spider's spinning so well, after all!" he went on. "Flies before you have tried the same game, and with the same success."

"I know it," suddenly cried the girl. "Lisa Dubarre is only reaping the whirlwind of her folly."

"Like other foolish people before you."

Captain Nantes studied her a moment in silence.

"What would you do if I were to open the doors?" he queried with a smile.

"Don't ask me!"

"Would you hunt the Bowery Shadow up again?"

There was no reply.

"Or would you go back to France?" continued the Malay.

"I need not answer, for you are not here to open the doors!" said Lisa at last.

"You are right! I am not. I called to see whether you are comfortable."

"Take my place and answer yourself!" was the reply.

Captain Nantes laughed.

Lisa fell back and went to an iron-barred window upon whose scanty sill she leaned with her face turned from the Malay.

For several minutes the adventurer watched her with a malignant smile at the corners of his mouth. It was like a hawk watching a helpless dove.

"Girl!" he said suddenly.

The figure at the window did not stir.

"Fleur-de-lis?"

Lisa whirled with a startling cry.

"Don't!" she exclaimed in a voice of agony.

"Anything in my hearing but that name! It was never to be spoken again. You are bound by an oath to keep it back."

An oath! What did Captain Nantes care for a vow however sacred?

"I thought it would fetch you," he said to the girl. "There is one name to which you will answer. You intended to betray Isis."

"It is false! I never thought of such a thing!" was the quick response.

"You had but to take another step and the second treason would have been accomplished. You saved the detective's life. You sought him out in order to set him on my trail; you told him all you knew about me. In another interview you would have finished the work; Isis would have been denounced."

Lisa, who was deathly pale, was looking at Captain Nantes with a pair of eyes that seemed to pierce him through.

"I have breathed nothing against the Lady of the Avenue!" cried she. "Not in thought even have I broken my compact with her. You can accuse, but not prove. The man who says I have betrayed her, breathes a falsehood that will stand against him forever on the Book of God!"

Captain Nantes saw directed at him the quivering finger of the French girl, and her tall figure, drawn to its true height, added to the tableau which nothing could ever efface.

"I know you!" cried he. "A woman with your history would deny anything."

"Who gave me that history? Who fastened upon me the infamous name you uttered awhile ago? My history is yours! For love of you, I became—Nay! I will not soil my tongue with the accursed nickname! But I am still Lisa Dubarre. You can't rob me of the name my father bore. Your accusations don't make a

a traitress of me. The secrets of Isis of the Avenue are safe with me."

"Safe until Captain Cormorant asks for them!" said the Malay.

"No more!" and Lisa turned away again.

Captain Nantes looked after her with his old derisive smile.

"There is no breaking of the web, in fact," laughed he. "It tightens from this hour."

"I am ready!"

The three words were spoken while Lisa's face was still turned from him.

Captain Nantes reached back and turned the key. With another glance at Lisa, which meant a great deal, he opened the door.

"Good-night, Lisa!" he exclaimed. "Pleasant dreams in the web!" And before the girl could reply, even if she had thought of doing so, he crossed the step and was gone.

He crossed the room beyond to the trap which he had left open, lowered himself into the darkness beneath, and vanished.

"Game to the last!" he muttered, in the gloom of the subterranean corridor from which he had heard the swish of the river. "Lisa would be a match for Deejeah if she were pitted against that crafty creature. I must deal with the fly in the web. She swears fealty to Isis; but she has betrayed me. She must not fall into the hands of Captain Cormorant—not alive, at least. I will wait until Isis springs her trap, then the web contracts, and the fly disappears!"

Captain Nantes did not listen to the swish of the river now, but pushed down the corridor, found the door at the end of it, and was in the old house once more.

He did not take the precaution to look up the staircase, which lost itself in almost total darkness, therefore, he did not see the figure crouching there.

He opened the door as this figure rose and glided down the steps. He heard nothing.

All at once there fell upon his shoulders a touch that electrified him.

Before the hand—for a human hand it was—could close, Captain Nantes broke away, and, with a wild cry, rushed from the house, and, stumbling on the lower steps, fell headlong across the sidewalk!

A moment later he stood in the gutter, knowing that, by a miracle, as it were, he had escaped the twisted dagger of the Avenger of India.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE AVENGER OF INDIA.

ALTHOUGH half-stunned by the fall which might have proved as dangerous as the dagger from which he had fled, Captain Nantes thought he saw a figure emerge from the house and glide away.

He wondered if the dark huntress had been concealed in the house; if she had waited for his coming among its deep shadows; but he could not solve the puzzle, and, after locking the door, left the spot.

Neejar could not have seen Deejeah yet. The girl had not been to the temple since his (the Malay's) last visit; therefore, the twisted dagger was still on his track.

Captain Nantes pointed his mustache with more assiduity than ever.

He nearly lost himself in rage whenever he thought of the Indian girl.

What if she should strike him down at the very moment of the League's victory over Old Cormorant and Louis, his pupil? The thought was exasperating.

He went back to his quiet quarters, and with a pencil wrote beneath the device on the wall:

"A pagan girl can't end the days of Captain Nantes! He laughs at her futile rage!"

He stepped back, surveyed his work for a moment, then added an oath to what he had written, and burst into a derisive laugh!

"She knows nothing of Lisa's hiding-place," thought he, going back to Deejeah in the old house. "The secret of the trap-door is mine and is shared by no one. The French fly is safe in the web. She won't get to betray Isis as she betrayed me. Lisa has left the game!"

About an hour from the time of the Malay's escape from the consecrated knife in the hand of Deejeah, a man was watching the front of a house in another quarter of the city.

He stood on the opposite side of the street, where the keenest eye would not be apt to single him out. He seemed one of the shadows by which he was surrounded.

Old Cormorant had come to the spot in furtherance of the play in which he had taken a hand.

The house which kept his attention was the home of Isis Grabame; but it was closed and had a deserted air, and the papers had announced that the Queen of the League had left the city for a time.

The man of the Bowery had read of her departure; but still he was watching the house with the eye of a lynx, and moving not, like a statue.

For two hours, or, until past midnight, Old Cormorant kept his position. When he did move it was to walk noiselessly down the sidewalk and cross the street some distance below the League Queen's home.

He soon came back toward the house itself, but dodged into a dark alley a few yards from it and vanished.

Twenty minutes afterward a door opened at the end of the main corridor of the woman's mansion, and a man came forward.

An owl might have seen him in the gloom that prevailed there; a human eye could not.

A footstep came toward the parlor door; it opened and shut.

In another minute the room was pervaded by a soft light.

It revealed a man rather small of stature, with a smooth, Sphinx-like face, and deep dark eyes.

Old Cormorant!

Once more the detective of lower New York stood under the League Queen's roof. He was no longer Nicholas Ningen, the jeweler, but Old Cormorant, in his own garb and his true calling.

He passed into Isis's little chamber and let the heavy folds of the arras close behind him.

There was a lamp on the widow's desk; he lit it and began his work.

The New York detective unlocked the carved desk and looked in.

He found a lot of papers which he moved carefully.

He found also a small jewel-box which he picked up and examined.

The next minute he had opened it and taken out a bracelet with a setting of rubies.

Placing it on the lid of the desk, Old Cormorant drew forth a bit of folded paper which he unfolded until something that shone like a piece of glass was revealed.

He picked the little object up and raised the bracelet with the other hand.

In a moment the detective was trying to fit the shiny object into a hollow in the bracelet's setting, and after awhile he apparently succeeded to his satisfaction.

The setting, which had an empty pocket, was complete again; not a stone was missing.

Old Cormorant shook one of the rubies out, wrapped it in a piece of paper, which disappeared in an inner pocket, and restored the jewel-box and its contents to the desk.

All at once he sprang from the chair which he had occupied during these proceedings and listened.

His quick ears had caught a sound which was quite enough to put him on guard.

"Back from the South already?" mentally ejaculated Old Cormorant, putting out the light in the chamber, and in an instant rendering it dark.

He found his way back into one corner of the League Queen's room, and there he stood as motionless as he had stood under the tree on the sidewalk an hour before.

For full five minutes the Bowery Shadow heard no other noises.

Then he felt the curtains drawn apart, and he knew that he was not the sole occupant of the place.

Had Isis come back?

Suddenly a little light broke the spell of darkness, and Old Cormorant saw it applied to the lamp which had just assisted him.

Not until then did the figure of the person in the room stand revealed, and the man in the corner saw—not Isis, the plotter—but Deejeah, the Avenger of India!

The Indian girl had come back to scenes with which she must be familiar, for her knowledge of the interior of the house had been gained by her residence there as Isis's maid.

Deejeah stood near the desk which the detective had just left.

Old Cormorant watched her as he had probably never watched a woman before.

He could not see her face, but he knew that it had a resolute expression; and he felt that Deejeah had come to the house on some important mission.

The Indian girl took from her pocket a key which opened the private desk. Her swarthy hand brought to light, not the jewel-box as Old Cormorant expected, but something he had not found—a flat packet as long as his hand.

He leaned forward in his eagerness to see what the Indian girl had discovered.

Deejeah took a seat in front of the desk.

Her nimble fingers opened her find, which proved to be an oblong box.

In a moment she had taken out and was holding up between her and the light, a dagger with an ivory handle curiously carved, and a slender blade which seemed to terminate in a needle-like point.

The blade of the dagger was straight, and when it was held in a certain position Old Cormorant could see that it was carved with characters of some sort.

But he could not see what the girl's eyes had already observed—that the dagger had engraved upon its cold, gray surface, the device of a gibbeted heart, crossed above by two arrows!

Deejeah's eyes seemed to see nothing but this. They had a glitter they had not had before; they snapped like the eyes of a cobra of her native country.

She turned the dagger over and over in her hand. She held it out at arm's length and looked at it from a dozen points of view, as if

the sight gave her a secret pleasure nothing else could give.

Old Cormorant watched her all the time.

All at once the huntress of India dropped the dagger and fell back. She threw out her hands and began a speech, not a word of which was intelligible to the detective.

The girl had gone back to her own tongue for the expression of her thoughts. She appeared to be addressing some god of India in Hindustani.

It was a curious sight for the shadow of the Bowery.

Now Deejeah's voice would sink to depths that rendered it almost unheard, and now again it would leap up in quick, sharp sentences, at the end of some of which Old Cormorant expected to see the girl bound from the room and leave him alone.

She suddenly caught up the dagger and bent toward the light. She examined it with more care than before. Her dark finger was seen to trace something along the blade; it crept from hilt to point after the manner of a crawling serpent.

"It is enough!" cried the girl in English.

"Deejeah knows at last! She suspects no longer. The darkness is now light. She sees to the heart of the plot that threatened the fanes of India. She is the sworn Child of the Twisted Dagger, and nothing shall break her oath. They can take the tattoo mark from their breast and arms, but that will not save them from Vishnu's avengers. The time is at hand! The god has heard Deejeah, the oath-bound. She missed the heart she sought awhile ago: but she has found the hidden dagger of the League. It has given her another victim. Let the guardian of the dark doors stand ready to open them. Two souls will knock for admission by and by!"

Old Cormorant saw the girl's hand move toward the light, and a moment afterward the room was again in darkness.

He felt the curtains move as before, and when the parted folds had met, he knew that he was again the sole tenant of the apartment.

He let several minutes go by before he stirred.

He gave Deejeah time to quit the house, and when he left his corner, it was to move away on tip-toe and with every sense on the alert.

The detective did not want to encounter the Avenger of India in the dark.

Old Cormorant walked into the parlor. The soft carpet gave out no sounds.

He felt that he was alone, and in another moment was about to quit the house when, from the gloom that enveloped him, came a hand soft, but terrible, and he went toward the unseen wall with a grip at his throat!

"Who is the spy on the heels of Vishnu's child?" cried a voice in the dark.

CHAPTER XXX.

CLOSING IN.

IN AN ANOTHER instant the detective knew that Deejeah the oath-bound had not left the house, but that she had been lurking in the dark, perhaps for him.

Old Cormorant could not speak for the hand under his chin; but in a moment the clutch relaxed and he caught his breath.

"You needn't choke me to death. I'm no enemy of yours," he said.

"Then, why are you here? You are not the serpent that got away from the consecrated knife in the old house awhile ago."

"I am not."

"Let me look at you."

In a short time the whole interior of the parlor became revealed to the man of the Bowery, and he looked into the dark face and still gleaming eyes of the Indian girl.

"Ha! the fox that hunts his fellow foxes!" cried Deejeah, bending forward and ending her ejaculation with a laugh. "I know you!"

Old Cormorant did not reply.

"You are not the snake that got away!" continued the avenger.

"You found him, then?"

"Yes, to lose him! He is quick, like all his people. But wait! Deejeah will find him again."

"Did you track him to the old house?"

"I did."

"What took him thither?"

"I did not seek to know that. Deejeah cares nothing for his secrets; she wants the man himself."

"Of course."

"But you want his secret; you want to know why he went to the old house?"

The detective could hardly repress a slight start.

The shrewd Indian girl had read his very thought, as it were.

"You can have the yellow fox," he replied.

"Tell me where the house stands."

Deejeah seemed to hesitate.

"Can I trust this man?" her look said to Old Cormorant. "If I tell him, won't he watch the place for Captain Nantes, and rob me of a victim? He is a detective and is on the trail of a crime with which he had connected the Malay. What would he care for me if I were to let him find the man I have sworn to slay with the Twisted Dagger?"

"Tell me about the old house to which you

tracked him and I will let you have the trail to yourself," continued the Bowery tracker.

He said this with such good emphasis that the girl seemed to become convinced.

"I will tell you. I will trust the fox that hunts foxes," she rejoined. "If he breaks his word with Deejeah he must not sleep."

"I'll not break it," said Old Cormorant solemnly.

Then the girl proceeded and located the scene of her last encounter with Captain Nantes.

"He was as quick as a cat," she finished, making no secret of her attempt on the Malay's life. "I had barely touched him ere he was gone, and I would not follow him into the street. I know not what took him to the old house. It may hold a secret."

"The detective thought it did, but he did not tell the Indian girl so. He more than half believed that he had found Lisa's trail again, that somewhere beyond the threshold of the dark house was the missing girl who knew so much about the Unknown Hand.

"You were here when I came, weren't you?" suddenly questioned Deejeah.

"I was."

"You saw me in your room," and the girl sent a quick glance toward the curtains which hung between them and Isis's chamber.

"I saw you there."

"I felt, when too late, that eyes were looking at me," she smiled. "I knew that some one was near, watching me from some secret place; but I did not think of you. I came here and waited for you in the dark. I knew that who ever was in the little room would come out by and by, and I found you by your footsteps. She is not here?"

"No. Your mistress has left the city."

Old Cormorant thought he saw a half-incredulous smile at the dark lips before him.

Did Deejeah doubt the announcement of Isis's departure which he had discovered in the morning paper?

"She is Deejeah's mistress no longer!" exclaimed the child of Vishnu. "Deejeah has lived in the dark a long time. Did the human fox of the New World see the dagger in Deejeah's hand?"

"I could not help it, girl."

"But his eyes were not sharp enough to read its inscription?"

"No; there was too much space between us for that."

"Let Deejeah show you, then."

The Indian girl moved toward the curtained room and Old Cormorant followed.

She lit the lamp that stood on Isis's desk, lifted the lid and soon found the dagger case.

A minute afterward the detective was looking at the deadly-looking blade that lay across Deejeah's hand, and the girl was eying it, too, with breathless curiosity.

"Look!" said she, moving a finger over the glossy surface. "Behold the sign!"

"The sign?" queried the detective, as if he had never heard of the gibbeted heart which was engraved on the dagger.

"Ah! the sign of the League against the faithful!" cried the girl. "Deejeah has lived with the Englishman's widow blindfolded! She has been in this room a thousand times, yet she suspected nothing. She has even seen the dagger-case; but still the scales did not fall from her eyes. She knows more now. Deejeah no longer lives in the dark!"

"Did she fetch the blade from India?" asked Old Cormorant.

"From the land of my people!" was the response.

"Why did she leave it here?"

Deejeah gave the detective a look which he could not fathom.

"I can't tell you all. The morning would come," she went on. "The daggers of the Coiled Cobra League are for traitors. The oath was, that those bearing the strange device you see on the blade in my hand were to strike down no one but a traitor. That is why Isis left it behind. She is not on the trail of one who has betrayed the Order. But she has probably taken another knife with her."

The Hindoo girl crossed the room to a little shelf fixed to the wall. The detective saw that it contained many objects, and while he looked he noticed Deejeah's hand among them.

"It is gone," said the girl, coming back to him. "My late mistress has not gone off unarmed. It was here the other day, but my hand finds it not."

"Then it was not a dagger like the one on the desk?"

"No; but it can slay all the same. It is where Isis is. Left the city, did you say?"

"Yes. The papers announce her departure."

"When is she to return?"

"They do not inform me."

Deejeah, without another word, restored the engraved dagger to its case and put it away, shutting the desk like a person in a fit of abstraction.

"You want her, don't you?" she asked, so suddenly that Old Cormorant, who was watching her closely, gave a quick start. "You are on the trail of the strange death of the American nabob? Don't give me any secrets which I do

not already possess! I have said who you are looking a little after the woman who owns this house. Who told you that she came from India?"

"Don't forget my calling."

"Ah! you found it out, did you?" cried Deejeah. "Fox-like, you got at her past life. Did Neejar tell you? You know the priest of Vishnu."

"I know that he keeps his secrets pretty well," was the detective's reply.

"Sometimes and not as well as he should. Do you think—No, I won't ask you. Let us go. Or, do you want to hunt the house for secrets?"

"I have learned all I can learn to-night."

They left the room together, and in the parlor Deejeah whirled upon Old Cormorant and her hand tightened suddenly on his arm.

"I'm going to be fair with you," she exclaimed. "I am one of the Avenging Children of the Sacred East. I carry on my person the consecrated dagger of Vishnu. I came from India to find the heart of the plotter—to slay the hunted conspirators of the Coiled Cobra! My recorded oath is to spare none, male or female, white or dark. Nothing can keep me from my victim, though I may be baffled for a time, and my hand pushed aside. I may interfere with your work. My trail may cross yours, and, when you think you have found your quarry, the sacred blade may interpose. I don't care how badly American justice may want the person whom you hunt; if that person belongs by right to Vishnu, Vishnu will take him!"

"I see!" cried old Cormorant, looking at the Hindoo maid. "You know nothing but your oath."

"Nothing but my oath!" was the echo. "If you find your quarry first, take possession of it; but even then the blessed dagger of the child of India may blind you for a moment, and the oath be fulfilled!"

Deejeah fell back and went to the door.

"Don't follow me into the street. In this game there are eyes that never sleep!" said she, after a moment's silence. "I did not expect to find you here; but I'm glad, after all. You know what to expect, and you will know how to take me. Good-night."

Old Cormorant stood alone in the room where the hands of Deejeah had found his throat.

"I've got to watch her," he exclaimed. "She did not speak one word amiss. She believes that the Unknown Hand—the one that struck Lot Lisperard down—came from India. I think I have found a trail to Lisa, thanks to Deejeah's attempt on the Malay's life. But I have to look out for this cunning creature whose mission is to slay without mercy. It is a part of her religion. I'll be on the alert, Deejeah, my child; and in the home of Isis I swear that you shall not snatch from me the prey now almost in sight. I have lost the Unknown Hand; but I know who its owner is, and to find it in the shadow of your dagger makes me all the more eager to score the greatest victory of my life!"

Not long afterward Old Cormorant stood among the shadows of a Square talking in low tones to a youth who eagerly drank in every word.

"Beginning to lose hope, is she?" exclaimed the Bowery Vidocq. "Tell her, Louis, yes, tell Ninon that I am closing in!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

FOUND IN THE DARK.

CAPTAIN NANTES sat once more in the room upon whose wall the hand of Deejeah had left the sign of the Coiled Cobra League—a bit of drawing which, as we have seen, had, for a moment, frightened him almost out of his wits.

He was quite alone, and the time was ten o'clock the night after Old Cormorant's interview with the Indian girl in the closed mansion on the avenue.

He had just finished the reading of a letter that had come to him through the ordinary post, and it lay on the table before him as it had fallen from his hand.

The letter would have been "Greek" to thousands, but to Captain Nantes, who pointed the ends of his mustache rather nervously, it was as plain as print. If he had been compelled to translate the missive he would have made it read as follows:

"Don't think for a moment that I have fled the game. You understand the announcement which seems to have hoodwinked the fox. I am nearer than you think. Keep an eye on the Indian girl; but don't feel uneasy about me. I am about to play my 'hand' against the enemy, and it is a 'hand' which cannot be successfully trumped, I care not what cards he holds. Be startled by nothing; but be prepared for anything. Wait! watch! be silent!"

The postmark of the city told how the letter had journeyed to find Captain Nantes. That alone would have informed him that the Queen of the Cobra League was still near despite the paragraph which had appeared in the papers announcing her departure South for an indefinite season.

Captain Nantes picked the letter up and looked at it with a smile.

"Cunning? I should say so!" he laughed. "She didn't lose any shrewdness by coming to this country. I wouldn't want her after me, and when she offered to look after the blood-bound of the Bowery, I was too sharp to hold her back. Queen Isis will hit the bull's-eye if it can be hit at all. She thinks she has hoodwinked the old fox. By Jove! I hope she has!"

The Malay pocketed the letter which was written in Hindoo characters, and which he had read perhaps twenty times, then lit a cigar and leaned back in his chair.

He was waiting for some one; his manner showed it.

Several times during the next quarter of an hour he looked at his watch.

At last footsteps came up a stair just beyond the one door of the room, and a rap sounded.

"Come in!" said Captain Nantes.

The following moment he was looking at a well-dressed, sleek-looking man of forty-five, who was evidently the person for whom he had been waiting.

"Captain Clew?" inquired the Malay, as his visitor came forward.

"Yes, sir."

The detective—the senior member of the firm that had run Lloyd Lisperard down—took the chair toward which Nantes waved his hand and opened the ball.

"I'm here at your invitation, you know," he began.

"Yes, I sent for you because I thought I might be of service to you in the case now in hand."

"The Lisperard case, eh?"

"The same, sir."

"Don't you think we have the right man?"

"I'm not disputing that. Having him, you don't want to fail to convict."

"We don't intend to!" answered the detective. "We never catch the wrong man, Clew and Triller don't. That is our motto, I might say. Do you know the prisoner?"

"I've seen him."

"At home?"

"No, abroad. Do you think the girl, Miss Ninon, has told all she knows about the events of that night?"

"She may tell more by and by," mysteriously added the detective.

"If she does not get stubborn on your hands."

"She can't afford to do that."

"You don't know these women."

The New York detective seemed to grow suddenly suspicious of Captain Nantes. Had he sent for him in order to extract from him certain information about the man who was in the toils and the shadow of death, as well?

He again reminded the Malay that he had called on invitation, and that he had not come to be pumped in the interests of any one.

"Oh, we will come to business then!" smiled Captain Nantes. "You want to watch a young man who is playing a hand against you and your partner."

"For the prisoner?" queried Captain Clew.

"For the man you have caught. I have discovered this by the merest accident, and I thought it my duty to warn you."

"Thanks," bowed the detective. "I think we shall be found capable of dealing with this covert enemy or rival, or whatever he is."

"Enemy and rival," repeated the Malay. "That is right."

"We want no information which might turn out less strong than it looks," cautiously advanced the independent Vidocq.

"I'm giving you a straight tip," was the answer. "The girl, Ninon, regrets her words; she will be cautious next time. You can't convict your prisoner without her testimony, no matter what she has said. She is going away."

"Going away?" cried the detective, exhibiting genuine surprise.

Captain Nantes twisted his mustache and nodded.

"When?" asked Captain Clew.

"That is why I sent for you. She may be gone now."

In a moment the detective was on his feet.

"Is this the young man's work?" cried he.

"It looks like it," said the Malay. "There may be somebody behind him."

"Captain Cormorant, you mean? We know the Bowery fox, and we have kept an eye on him. He is out of sorts because we, and not he, have solved the Lisperard Mystery. The old scenter was at sea all the time. We had the trail from the first, and our coup fell upon him like a dynamite bomb from a clear sky. So his hand moves in the shadow, does it?"

"He is the young man's friend," answered Captain Nantes, quietly.

"I see; and the two, Old Cormorant and his pupil, have championed young Lisperard's cause. It might prove serious for us if Ninon left the city without leaving a clew behind."

"I thought so."

The detective thought deeply for a moment.

"Is this all? Are you done?" he asked.

"I know of nothing else just now."

"I can only thank you now," was the response. "We don't intend to be robbed of our

victory—not by Old Cormorant and Louis, at least. Do you occupy this house? We may want to meet again."

"I'm not always here," said Captain Nantes evasively.

"A bird with more than one nest, eh? Well, don't let me pump you. Good-night, captain." And a broad grin of intense satisfaction overspread the Malay's face while he listened to the noises that went down toward the street and finally died away among other sounds there.

"I'm not idle while Isis is busy!" he laughed to himself. "I want to bridle the boy, and also tether the girl. 'This will strengthen the toils that now surround the heir of the Lispenards. Captain Clew will act upon the information I let drop. He is more than a match for Louis. I have clipped the young falcon's wings!'"

Captain Nantes was so well satisfied with what he had done, that he went down and opened a bottle of wine in a stall all to himself where he could laugh over his little game and point his mustaches to his heart's content.

He tarried so long over his several bottles that when he came forth, his dark eyes had a light they did not have when he entered the place, and he attracted some attention while he walked through the room to the street.

"A little unsteady, but still shrewd and dangerous!" exclaimed a man who had been watching the captain's stall for near an hour. "He sometimes misses his mustache when he feels for it; but that's no difference. He is Captain Nantes all the same—Captain Nantes of the Coiled Cobra League, old Ixion's masked customer of the stormy night, and the friend of Isis of India."

If the Malay had thought of a spy he would have looked behind him, but it was evident from his movements that such a person was not in his mind at that time.

He stood awhile on the sidewalk like a man getting his bearings in a strange neighborhood, but suddenly started off, and led the person at his heels a long chase until he unlocked a door on a street which was narrow and full of shadows.

"I've been all over the old house," murmured Captain Nantes's follower. "I've ransacked the place from garret to the underground passage; but it has yielded nothing. Lisa is still missing. Now, the Malay comes back here. He has more than one nest, but something very important must draw him to the place where he escaped by a miracle the consecrated dagger of the Indian girl. He cannot have an engagement with Isis here. No; the adventurer of two worlds returns on his own hook."

By this time the door had closed on Captain Nantes, and three noiseless strides carried the speaker to the steps. He listened there a long time; he produced a little instrument from his pocket, and cleverly picked the lock.

The man at the door was no match for Captain Nantes in size. He had a small figure, but it was well knit and wiry, and his hands were almost as dark as a mulatto's.

He opened the door and slipped in.

There was no light in the hall, and he stood for a second in the dark, using his ears where his eyes, keen as they were, were of no service.

"Vanished! lost in the dark! Ah! Captain Nantes, you're a shrewd one!" mentally exclaimed the Malay's trailer.

With this he took a step forward, but his foot struck a yielding object, and he drew back with a half-suppressed cry.

The next moment he stooped and felt near the floor in the dark.

"Here it is!" he thought, as his fingers came in contact with something, and then he felt a human face, and, a moment later, a mustache, with points like needles!

He had found Captain Nantes!

CHAPTER XXXII.

TAKEN FROM THE DEAD.

FOR a full minute the man—who was Old Cormorant—seemed to hold his breath from horror in the gloomy hallway.

Something told him that the man whom he had found on the floor was dead—that instead of the avenging blade seeking him, he had sought and found it.

Deejeh might be near and ready with the same swift dagger to slay the person who should discover her on the scene of her deed.

After awhile Old Cormorant stooped again, and found the face in the dark, as before.

It was still warm, but there was about it a feeling of mingled horror and repulsion.

Unable to withstand the curiosity by which he was being devoured, he struck a light.

"Here goes, hit or miss!" he said to himself. "If Deejeh is here she will know that I have found her victim."

He let the light fall upon the face he had discovered.

He had not been mistaken; he had really found Captain Nantes!

The figure of the Malay lay slightly on its side, but with the face upturned, probably just as the captain had dropped at the death-blow.

The yellowish face looked as handsome as ever, although the seal of death had been placed upon it.

"She found him!" thought Old Cormorant, as he gazed at the sight. "If I don't look out, the same merciless knife will come between me and the Unknown Hand, cheating me out of my prey. Deejeh must not battle me just because she is oath-bound. By Jove! she has already provoked me nearly too much."

The detective looked up as if he expected to see the avenger of India within the light of his match, but he saw nothing.

"Swift to kill, swift to fly!" he smiled.

Looking again at the dead, he saw what he had not seen before—a paper peeping from an inside pocket.

It might reveal something, and the slightest discovery was not to be thrown aside at this stage of the game.

Old Cormorant pounced upon the paper, drew it forth, and opened it with one hand.

"Ixion can decipher this!" said he, seeing that the document was covered with strange characters. "Deejeh and Neejar can do the same, but I won't ask them."

He transferred the paper to his own pocket, and threw his burnt match to the floor.

"Good-night, Captain Nantes," he exclaimed. "You have been hunted down by a creature who knew nothing but the oath she took in India. Wait! I forgot something. Ixion once removed the sign of the Coiled Cobra from the breast of a certain person, and afterward tattooed, in a peculiar manner, the arm of a masked man. Let me see if I have found his customer."

Another match was again struck and Old Cormorant bent over Captain Nantes. He opened the garments that covered the breast, and looked closely at the flesh over the stilled heart. It was natural in appearance.

Then the Bowery Shadow pushed the sleeve back over the left arm, and there beheld a tattoo which was as plain as the day when the tattooer put it there.

"The loss of the tattoo over the heart did not save him. It failed to preserve the life of millionaire Lispenard. It is death to have belonged to the Indian League, and death, as well to have betrayed it. There seems to be no difference."

Old Cormorant thought of many things when he found himself hurrying down the street with the old house and its ghostly tenant behind; but one thought above all others seemed uppermost.

With Captain Nantes had died the secret of Lisa's hiding-place. He could not follow the dead, and the important link, which he called "the French maid," seemed to have passed beyond reach.

"He would have led me to Lisa in time!" said the detective to himself. "By heavens! Deejeh, my tigress, I've a mind to hand you over to the police!"

He kept on until, on the river front, he ran up a narrow stairs and burst in upon Ixion, the tattooer, at work.

The strange man smiled as though he knew that Old Cormorant would come back sooner or later.

"I want you to make use of your eyes and your knowledge!" cried the detective, jerking forth and thrusting into the tattooer's hand the paper which he had taken from the dead man's pocket.

Ixion gave him a quick look the moment he caught sight of the mystic writing.

"You didn't have this when you were here before," said the tattooer.

"No. It fell into my hands awhile ago."

"To-night?"

"To-night! I want to know what it is. The language of Neejar is a puzzle to me. You are familiar with it. Translate the document."

"It may be private, Captain Cormorant."

"I don't dispute that. The more private, the greater my desire to know what it says."

Ixion bent himself to the task before him. He was watched by the Bowery Shadow like a hawk as he ran his finger from word to word, reading the whole slowly to himself.

"This seems to concern you," smiled the tattooer, looking up at last.

"Ha! I thought so!" exclaimed Old Cormorant.

"Isis wrote it."

"That's better yet!"

"The Queen of the Coiled Cobra is somewhere in the dark, playing a hand of her own."

"Against me, of course!"

"Listen."

A moment later Ixion of New York began to read the letter which he had mentally translated, Old Cormorant drinking in with eagerness each word as it fell from his tongue.

The prize found in the old house proved to be, as the reader has doubtless suspected, the letter received by Captain Nantes a short time prior to his last, and fatal, visit to the foe who lurked for him in the dark.

Its most obscure sentences were plain to the fox of the Bowery.

More than once he smiled as Ixion read, and when the end had been reached he touched the old tattooer's wrist.

"A clever creature and a deep game, Ixion!" laughed he. "Isis of the League is preparing for a play against me."

"Why against you?" asked the tattooer.

"You know what I am, Ixion."

"The best trail-hound in America!" exclaimed Ixion. "If I had committed a crime, I'd first get away from you."

"Would you, indeed, old fellow?"

"That is, I would if I could," grinned Ixion. "Isis says in the letter that the 'hand' she holds cannot be trumped by the enemy."

"Old Cormorant!" replied the detective. "Can't be trumped, eh? That remains to be seen."

Ixion's gaze returned to the letter, and Old Cormorant saw burning curiosity in his eyes.

"She didn't send this to you?" he cried, suddenly holding the paper up to the detective's eyes.

"Not she! She sent it to our old friend, Captain Nantes."

"And he—"

"He let me have it," broke in Old Cormorant. "Gave it to you?" exclaimed Ixion. "When did the Malay turn fool?"

The man of the Bowery leaned back and laughed at the expression on Ixion's face.

"You'll know more by and by," he said at last. "Captain Nantes gave up the letter without a word. You have helped me much to-night, Ixion. Accept my thanks."

The detective stood before the tattooer who looked up from his bench like one whose curiosity has been balked, not satisfied.

He said good-night, but watched Old Cormorant to the door, and did not resume work when he had gone.

"If it is Isis and Old Cormorant, the game must be exciting!" cried Ixion. "I know something about the woman. She originated the great league which intended to enrich itself with the sacred jewels in the Indian temples; but that was not his only aim. Isis hated the land and its institutions, especially its mystic religion. The sacred river was to have been poisoned, the temples secretly plundered, and the religion of India dealt a blow from which it might never have recovered. She led the plot; but there was a traitor—a weak heart, as it were."

"I recollect the morning when the scheme leaked out. Certain people disappeared as if the Ganges had engulfed them. The whole plot seemed to go to pieces. I afterward brought some to America on my vessel. I remember how we caught Captain Nantes stabbing the human effigy in his cabin; and Isis and her maid had a state-room in the same ship. I would have staked my head at the time that they were fugitives from the avenging daggers of India. I know it now."

"Has Captain Nantes turned against Isis? If not, how came he to give Old Cormorant the important letter? Perhaps the Malay has been arrested! Not he would have destroyed the letter. Captain Nantes is no traitor—I don't care what other crimes he may have committed."

The puzzle seemed too deep for Ixion, and he gave it up.

While he attempted to solve it, the man who was often uppermost in his thoughts was many squares away.

Old Cormorant had made another discovery. He had caught sight of a face in the gaslight which strangely interested him.

It confirmed the discoveries he had already made, and sealed with a certain emphasis the letter Ixion had just translated.

"Can I see you, sir, just a moment?" said a voice at Old Cormorant's elbow a moment after his discovery.

The Bowery detective looked down into the face of a little girl, thin of figure, and hollow-eyed.

"Aren't you Captain Cormorant, of the Bowery?" the same voice asked.

"I am."

"Then, I have found you! I've been to your place, but no one was at home. A woman sent me. I have been following you a long time, trying to make up my mind. I have a letter for you. Here it is. But, oh, sir, let me say that I believe she has made a decoy of me to draw you into a terrible trap of some kind. I'm sorry I took the letter!" And the girl was gone in a moment.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE COILED COBRA STRIKES.

OLD CORMORANT looked after the child, but she had already disappeared.

Then he turned his attention to the letter.

Was it a decoy? Was the missive, which appeared to be very brief, but the bait of a trap which had been set for him?

He knew with whom he had to deal; that the cunning—the revengeful cunning of the Queen of the Cobra League was directed against him with full force, and that the Unknown Hand would stop at nothing to baffle him and tighten the toils about Lloyd Lispenard and Ninon.

Not finding the nimble child, the detective looked for the face he saw just before the little one came up; but it, too, had vanished.

In another moment, in the light of a *café* which happened to be close by, he opened the letter and it read.

"CAPTAIN CORMORANT:—

"May I hope to see you immediately after reading this at No. 999 Q—street? I am no longer at home. The toils tighten. Come to me!"

"NINON."

Old Cormorant read the singular letter the second time before he looked up. Ninon no longer in the mansion on the avenue? Could it be?

Louis had said nothing about the girl's intended departure, and it was not likely that she would quit the place without informing her friend, the detective, beforehand.

A smile came to the Bowery Shadow's face and remained there while he folded the letter and put it away.

If Ninon had not left home, it was no trap in spite of the child's suspicions.

"We'll see about this," exclaimed Old Cormorant quitting the *café*.

Half an hour later he rung the bell at the mansion of the tragedy. He waited five—ten minutes for a response, but none came.

A footstep at last came down the almost deserted sidewalk, and a young girl glided up to the step and looked at him.

"Miss Lispenard isn't at home. The house is shut up," said the girl.

"When did she go away?"

"This afternoon."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. She didn't tell me about her affairs."

"Ah! she spoke to you, then?"

"Yes. I was her maid until to-day. I've been here ever since Julie went off. Miss Ninon said she'd turn up some of these days, and that's about all she did say."

The girl was honest-looking.

"Thank you," responded Old Cormorant, coming down to the sidewalk. "Is this the beginning of another mystery, my girl?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Ninon don't believe now what she did at first. She thinks Mr. Lispenard innocent; but it looks so strange in her to go away while he is in the net, deserting him as it were. I don't think I could do so if I were Ninon and thought as she thinks. A man was here hunting her awhile ago."

"A man?"

"Yes. He was one of the two detectives who tightened the coils about Lloyd—Mr. Clew, I think they call him."

"What did he say?"

"He seemed to be very much disappointed by Ninon's going off; said the girl would be found in spite of her cunning, and such talk."

"Then, he thinks Ninon is playing against him?" queried Old Cormorant.

"It slipped from him before he thought," smiled the maid. "He swore a great oath that he would have Ninon before to-morrow night, and off he went in high dudgeon, not at all like a detective, to my notion."

The man of the Bowery could not help smiling at the girl's language, and seeing that she had told her story, he took his departure.

There was now no doubt that Ninon had gone off for a purpose, and in a rather mysterious manner. He knew that she detested the two detectives who had worked the case against Lloyd Lispenard; that she despised them for their work, and, this being the case, it was not unnatural that she should wish to avoid further intercourse with them.

He now thought of the letter obtained from the child on the street.

No. 999 Q—street, while not exactly known to him, was in a neighborhood with which he was not entirely unfamiliar.

Old Cormorant proceeded in that direction; but we will transport the reader to the premises ahead of him and enter the house before he reaches the door and rings the bell.

Q—street is one of the thoroughfares of Gotham which end abruptly. It is what might be called a "cut-off street," is not more than six squares in length and occupies an insignificant place on the map of the teeming city of nets and snares.

The houses for the most part are inhabited by people who seldom make the acquaintance of the police—quiet people who prefer isolation on the little street to prominence in other parts of New York.

Unpretentious brick houses compose the buildings on both sides of the street from one end to the other. There are no shade trees for none are needed, the narrowness of the street rendering their presence unnecessary.

No. 999 is, like its neighbors on both sides, and across the street.

It is just the retreat which a girl like Ninon would seek for the present, in her desire to get away from the men who, stimulated by the ten-thousand dollars offered for the murderer of Lot Lispenard, were doing their best to convict the very man who had offered it—the victim's son and heir.

Walking back and forth across the carpet of a front room to the right of the door, was a woman whose strides denoted the impatience by which she was being devoured.

Her face was covered by a close-fitting mask which effectually hid her looks. She wore a

dark habit with loose sleeves which gave the arms free play.

Her step was quick and springy, and her feet gave out no sounds as she went from wall to wall, passing the minutes at this exercise which resembled, more than anything else, the cage walk of the captive tigress.

"Not yet!" she said, sudden'y. "My letter found him. I did not let the messenger get out of my sight a moment. I saw the message delivered. He went to satisfy himself that it was no decoy, as I knew he would. He will find no one at home in the avenue mansion; he will learn before he turns back that she has gone away, and then he will come here! They think I left my cunning in the land of a thousand gods. They think that I am no longer powerful because I keep the fine house on the avenue with everything I want at my beck. They don't know me! they don't look underneath the velvet. They see nothing of the claws it hides. Ah! if they knew what I could tell them, they would shrink from the woman whose smiles they have courted, and whose Indian maid they have admired. When I have finished with the hunter perchance I will go back. The traitor has been dealt with. The law—American justice, they call it!—will soon round up the play with an act peculiarly its own. The captain and I will laugh last—that is, if Deeje, the huntress, does not find him before we can silence her and blunt the twisted blade she carries!"

Thus murmured the masked woman who walked the floor of the room so dimly lighted by a small jet that there were many shadows in which a person of her stature could hide.

At length she stopped and sprung to the door.

"He is here!" she cried, halting there, with her hand on the knob. "I knew he would come! He did not find her at home, and then he gave up all thoughts of a decoy!"

The following minute the light tones of a bell sounded in the hall beyond the door.

The woman opened the portal at which she stood, stepped in'o a dark hall, and approached the outer door, with her eyes fairly snapping behind the openings in the mask.

Her hand found the knob as if her fingers had eyes. She turned it slowly and opened the door in the same manner, keeping behind it and out of sight.

"Come in!" she said loud enough to reach the man on the step.

A footstep was the reply received, and when the masked woman shut the door she was not the sole occupant of the dark corridor.

"Straight ahead to the door at your right," she resumed in a whisper, "I feared you would not come."

She heard the unseen visitor walk forward, heard a door open, and the next moment she was at it herself.

She glided across the room and put up her hand toward the bluish flame.

All at once the whole chamber was revealed by a blaze of light!

As the woman stepped forward she saw a man turn and face her.

He was small but wirily built, and his face was as smooth as her own beneath the velvet mask.

"Didn't you suspect?" exclaimed she, her gleaming eyes at that moment denoting a smile under the domino. "I thought you were a fox, Captain Cormorant!"

There was no answer. The eyes of the man—Old Cormorant—were fixed upon her.

"I sent for you and you are here," continued the woman. "I knew you would not come to see me in my real role, and I thought the name of Ninon would entrap you."

"It is a good play, madam. Let us have done with preliminaries. You say you sent for me. I am here. What do you want?"

The man of the Bowery was terse and in good-humor. He did not like to confess that the Queen of the Coiled Cobra had decoyed him.

As he finished he looked toward the door.

"This is a cage!" exclaimed the woman, intercepting the glance. "Why did I send for you, Captain Cormorant? To prove that the oath-bound League of India is as potent in New York as it was where it was born! You have come hither to quit the game forever—to die!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

STILL ON THE TRAIL.

"ONE! Here! look at it! Hold it up before the face of Vishnu, and let the sacred eyes approve. He escaped me once; but the second time I did not fail!"

The person who spoke thus stood before Neejar, the pagan priest, in the idol room of the Hindoo Temple on — street.

It was Deeje—Deeje the sworn huntress and avenger.

The hour was ten at night, and the girl had just come to the place with eyes apparently on fire, and every fiber of her frame partly unstrung.

As she addressed the startled priest, she held toward him in her palm a slender dagger with a curiously-twisted blade. A close inspection

would have shown that it was covered with singular-looking characters, which were in reality Hindoo letters.

Old Neejar transferred his gaze from the girl's face to the dagger, and back again.

Perhaps he recalled his promise to Captain Nantes that he would hold the huntress back; but he seemed to see that it was useless now, for if he rightly interpreted her words, she had found and finished the man with the pointed mustache.

"There is another one!" suddenly resumed Deeje. "I have been with her a long time without even suspecting her. But I have seen the dagger of the League. I had even handled the blade, whose inscription tells me that it is for traitors alone."

Neejar did not seem to hear the last sentence.

"Where is Captain Nantes?" he asked.

"Where the dagger left him!" exclaimed the girl.

"They will find him?"

"Who will?"

"The police of New York."

"They can't restore him to life. It was a blow in the dark, but you know that a second one was not needed. The consecrated knife never strikes twice."

"I know," and the dark face of the old priest relaxed into a smile for a moment.

"Let them find him," continued Deeje.

"They won't know who did it."

"But the other one will."

"Ah! the other one!" laughed the Indian girl.

"She will know! She knows that Deeje has been his shadow these many months, following him day and night, waiting for the appointed time. She dared not deal the blow till it came. You know that, Neejar."

"Where is she? In her house on the avenue?"

"No. She has disappeared. The elegant house is locked."

"Ah! she has left the city!"

"She is still here," was the answer. "It is on her arm, unless she had it taken off like Captain Nantes and the traitor who died by the dagger of the League."

Neejar, the priest, looked steadily at the girl for a moment without replying.

"I have something here," said he, stepping through the dim light of the room to the foot of the idol Vishnu, whose head almost touched the ceiling.

The eyes of the girl followed him with intense curiosity.

Suddenly the dark body of the pagan stooped, and his knuckles smote the base of the statue.

In an instant a small door opened where he had struck, and a swarthy face made its appearance.

"The packet!" said Neejar in his native tongue.

The next moment the face had vanished, but a hand came out of the opening where it had been. Something rested on the palm.

Old Neejar snatched eagerly at this object, when the little door closed with a snap, and Deeje was looking at the Indian's prize.

The nimble fingers of the old man untied the packet, and in a minute a heavy gold ring rested in his palm, and Deeje was looking at it.

"Look! it has the crest—the sign of the League!" said he, taking up the ring and holding it close to the girl's face. "It was his, Deeje. It was made for the traitor; but he never wore it."

Deeje was permitted to take the ring in her hand, and the Indian priest watched her like a hawk while she turned it over and over, inspecting it closely the while, as though she were looking at it for the first time.

"Where did you get it, Neejar?" she suddenly asked.

The Indian smiled.

"He lost it on the ship," he replied.

"And you found it, ha?"

"Yes."

Deeje seemed to understand the man before her.

The owner of the ring had lost it, but it was because the velvet fingers of Neejar had filched it from him.

"He sent for it the night the dagger found him," resumed the priest. "His son came from him with a letter begging me to restore the ring."

"He knew you had it, then?"

"Yes. He came here sometimes. He knew that I came to America in the same vessel that carried him, and he believed that I had the ring. As I have said, he sent his son after it. A glance at the letter the young man carried was enough. He offered half his fortune for the ring. He knew that the avenger was abroad—even in the New World. He had a shadow on his trail. He may have known, too, that you were hunting down the people of the Coiled Cobra. The recovery of the crested ring was all to him. He had had removed from his breast the sign of the League. No doubt he had burned every paper that referred to his sojourn in India. He was one of the weaklings of the League; he was one of the six traitors, five of whom died beyond the sea. He was the last one. And they say his son killed him!"

A low chuckle of derision followed the old Hindoo's speech.

"There is one man—one trail-dog—who does not think so," said Deeje. "

"One among many," was the quick response.

"He does not call himself beaten. He is still on the trail."

"Yes."

"I have seen him."

Deeje handed back the ring as she spoke, and saw Neejar restore it to the paper from which he had taken it.

"I have come to be alone with Vishnu," spoke the Indian girl.

"Is the knife to be offered again?"

"It is."

"Be careful the fox on the trail will outwit you!"

"He shall not," cried Deeje. "I have told him that I will not be beaten. He will know how Captain Nantes died when the police have found him, but he will keep the secret. The boy might not be so silent—"

"The boy! I know him!" cried Neejar. "He took the ring once, and had it in his possession some time; but he did not keep it. There were footsteps behind him, but he heard them not. There were eyes on his trail, but he was not sharp enough to see them. All at once everything became dark to him, and he lost the ring again. Hal hal! he was robbed almost before he could think. I know the boy! He hasn't the shrewdness of his master; but one day he will be an old fox; then look out!"

A minute afterward Neejar left Deeje alone in the apartment.

If Louis could have occupied the same corner he filled on a former occasion he would have seen Deeje reconsecrate the deadly twisted dagger devoted against the enemies of India.

Ten minutes had passed when the girl finished her task, and then the door opened, admitting Neejar again.

"Must the young man perish in the web?" inquired the old man.

"Why not? Isn't he the son of one who belonged to the Coiled Cobra?" exclaimed the girl, bitterly.

"Yes; but he never saw the sacred land of the Hindoos. You know that his father died by the dagger of the League, that the men who are after the money offered for the assassin, have thrown about him certain coils which are surely strangling him. The girl loves him."

"Has she told you this?" exclaimed Deeje, her hand closing on Neejar's wrist. "Has the adopted child of the traitor been here to plead with you to open your mouth?"

"No," replied the priest. "But she loves him. Ninon, the ward, would die to save the man in the coils."

"Let her die, then!"

The face of the Indian girl seemed to grow darker than ever as the sentence fell from her tongue.

"My mission is to hunt and to hate!" she went on. "I am the Child of the Twisted Dagger, hunting the people who were in the conspiracy of the Coiled Cobra, hating all in whose veins their blood runs! Let us not talk about the girl and her love. There is something more important before us. The moving spirit of the great plot is in this city. The Queen of the League has escaped thus far the consecrated daggers of the tireless children. I know her! My eyes are opened at last. I could have taken her unawares a thousand times if I had but known; but I did not suspect. I have the fox to baffle. He will never arrest the French-Malay, unless he takes him dead! He is looking for the girl who sometimes spied and helped my late mistress. He believes that she can furnish the last link needed in his chain. Then he will turn on 'the Unknown Hand,' as they call it. But I must strike first. The Twisted Dagger must do its work before the detective of the Bowery can perform his task. There must be no delay on my part, Neejar. I must find the Queen of the Cobra League. Do I know where to look for her? My knife has an eye that never fails!"

Deeje walked from the room, and in the hall beyond laid her hand on the knob of the outer door.

"One question," said Neejar, touching the girl's wrist.

"What is it?"

"If Old Cormorant, the shadow, finds her first, will you give up the hunt?"

The eyes of the child of the dagger met the priest's in a look difficult to describe.

"There is but one ending to the chase, and that is death!" said she. "Once a Child of the Twisted Dagger, always one! Go back to Vishnu and wait for news. It will come. When I return there will be no Queen of the Coiled Cobra! The man of trails will stand empty-handed, and the skein will have run out!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

OUT OF THE WEB.

THE Indian girl seemed to increase in stature as she sent her last words ringing throughout the room. Her eyes flashed, she held above her head the twisted dagger with her dark fingers

encircling the hilt as though they would crush it in their coil.

Old Neejar, the priest, stood off and looked at her with a smile of quiet approval at his lips.

His sympathies were with the sworn huntress of his religion. He hated everything but the cause he served, and he seemed pleased that Deeje's absence from his shrine had prevented him from interposing a hand between the dagger and its victim.

The girl threw herself impulsively in front of the god when she had finished her response. Her black hair, breaking from its coil, fell on each side of her face and concealed it while the lips seemed to kiss the floor in silent supplication.

All at once she sprung up again as cool as a person of known nerve.

The knife had disappeared, and Neejar saw the hand which had held it quietly rearrange the hair as if nothing exciting had taken place.

"I must go!" said Deeje, leaning toward the old Indian. "Vishnu calls Deeje to the work before her. One more, and her hand will rest! She has found the slave; this time she goes in search of the queen."

She straightened again, caught the door-knob as if it were the throat of a victim, gave it a sudden wrench, and Neejar was alone once more.

"She will find her!" muttered the old man. "Nothing can hold her back." And he retired to the shrine room leaving the Child of the Twisted Dagger to pursue her mission to a tragic ending.

Let us follow Deeje for a time, with the promise, reader, that ere long we will come back to the man whom we left in the trap set for him by the Queen of the Cobra League.

If the Hindoo girl knew where to find her prey, she bent her steps in a strange direction.

She went almost straight to the old house in whose dark hall lay the silent figure of the dagger's victim.

What had brought Deeje back?

She stepped over the corpse of Captain Nantes as carefully as if she saw it in spite of the gloom, then, as if suddenly recollecting something, she came back to it and struck a match.

For a second or two Deeje held her little light over the handsome, though stiffened features, of the Malay. She looked down into the staring eyes, and perhaps noted the waxed points of the mustache upon which so much care had been bestowed.

She saw that the coat had fallen open, and the next minute her hand moved toward the pocket displayed by such means.

"No!" said she, suddenly withdrawing her hand. "We are not robbers. We kill but we do not plunder. The Children of Vishnu have but one mission, and it is not robbery!"

She throw her match away and arose, once more in the dark.

"I came hither to look further," she went on, still communing with herself. "The dead may lead me to the living. He came here for a purpose; on a mission of some kind. I know where to find the Queen of the Cobra, therefore, I can spend some time where I am."

She went to the end of the hall and found a door which she opened.

The Indian girl did not hesitate, but descended the steps which her foot found and reached the stone-walled corridor in which Captain Nantes had heard the sound of the river.

Deeje heard it, too.

She stopped suddenly in the stygian passage, and held one ear against the stones several minutes.

Did the monotonous swish remind her of the sacred rivers of India?

"I've heard it before. It never changes!" exclaimed the girl. "He has heard it, too; but he will listen no more!"

She moved down the corridor, feeling her way along the wall with a hand which she kept above her head.

All at once that hand came in contact with something—an iron bar.

Deeje came to a halt and began to examine the bar in the dark.

It was there for a purpose. She seemed to realize that she had made an important discovery.

In a little while she was trying to discover the secret of the iron bar. She moved it to one side, then back again, and at last she put her whole weight upon it.

Suddenly something like a trap appeared to open overhead.

Deeje had recourse to her matches again.

Sure enough her workings with the bar had opened a square door in the ceiling above.

She drew herself up into the place by grasping the edge of the trap, and then saw that she had reached the room of another house, some removes from the one in which she had left the last victim of the twisted blade.

The Hindoo girl left the trap open and crossed the room to the door which had caught her eye. Something seemed to tell her that beyond the portal an exciting discovery awaited her.

For the first time she hesitated.

"The living must be beyond this door if she is anywhere," murmured Deeje. "I came in

search of her. Why should I hold back now? She cannot blunt the point of the consecrated dagger."

She had already found an iron bolt above her head and her hand touched it with her last words.

The following moment she had pushed it back and opened the door.

A noise beyond the threshold greeted Deeje's ears, and the Indian girl instinctively laid her hand on the hilt of the twisted dagger.

She had shut the door carefully behind her, and now stood in the dark trying to interpret and locate the sound.

"I am here still," said a voice which caused Deeje to start.

It was a woman's voice and it soon sent the Hindoo huntress forward.

Some starlight came in at a barred window, and the searching eyes of the Indian girl found the figure of the speaker there.

"Here you are, sure enough!" exclaimed Deeje, darting toward the tenant of the room.

"My God! Is it you?" cried the other, falling back.

"It is I!" responded the Indian girl, looking into the blanched and thin face of Lisa. "Whom were you expecting?"

There was no immediate reply.

The glowing eyes of the Hindoo seemed to silence the French maid.

"I thought you were the Malay," she said, at length.

"The Malay? Captain Nantes, eh?" laughed Deeje, with derision.

"Captain Nantes!" echoed Lisa.

"I've come in his place. Did he bring you hither?"

"He did."

"Why?"

"He says I betrayed him."

"To whom?"

"To Old Cormorant, the detective."

"Did you, girl?"

"I did!" cried Lisa, firmly. "I had been in his web long enough. I tried to break the web; but, as you see, I've only strengthened it."

The girl smiled grimly while she spoke, watched closely by Deeje all the time.

"Did you track him to this place?" continued Lisa. "Did Captain Nantes in some manner betray his secrets? Or did Isis come to my rescue?"

At mention of the Cobra Queen's name, Deeje started violently, and her countenance changed from one of quiet eagerness to a look that frightened Lisa.

"Isis comes to no one's rescue!" cried Deeje. "She knows that you have been dealt with by Captain Nantes. The two had no secrets between them."

"Impossible!" Lisa exclaimed. "I have served Isis and so have you. They call you Deeje."

"And Deeje I am! Not Deeje, the slave; but Deeje, the avenger!"

"My God!"

Lisa drew back as far as the band at her wrist would let her, but it was a short tether.

"I don't want you," continued Deeje. "You have helped Isis in the game she has been playing. It was through you that she found the traitor of the Coiled Cobra. Would you betray her to the police? Would you tell Old Cormorant, the fox of the New World, all that you know about her if you had him here?"

"I see no reason for betraying Isis. I can't believe that she knew I was in Captain Nantes's grip."

The Indian girl burst into a laugh.

"Fool!" exclaimed she. "There are many things you don't know, Lisa. We have served the same mistress: you as a spy—I as a dupe—a blindfolded slave! If I were to let you out, where would you go?"

Lisa Dubarre shook her head.

"To the House on the Avenue?" queried Deeje.

"I might find him there."

"Nay! Captain Nantes, whom you dread, would not greet you in Isis's parlors. You would attempt to interfere with me."

"How with you?" inquired Lisa.

"By turning on Isis because she was content to leave you in the Malay's hands."

"I doubt that yet."

"Well, I'm going to trust you. I don't believe you can balk me, I am so near the end of the play," resumed Deeje. "Captain Nantes won't bother you any more, Lisa."

"Ah! thank Heaven! Have they arrested him?"

"No."

"Then—"

"The Malay is dead!"

Lisa uttered no cry at this. She looked into Deeje's eyes and saw a triumphant glitter there.

"Let us go," suddenly said the Hindoo. "I know but one way out of this place; it is the way I came."

Half a minute afterward Lisa was beyond the room where she had been Captain Nantes's captive. She and Deeje were threading the walled corridor beneath the house, and in time they went up the steps in the dark to the hall of the dead.

All at once the little arms of the Indian girl encircled Lisa's waist, and she felt herself lifted from the floor.

"Don't struggle but let Deeje have her way," said a voice at her ear.

She was carried forward a few steps, then a door was opened, and she was placed on her feet on the sidewalk.

She did not know that her rescuer had borne her over the body of Captain Nantes, nor that, when Deeje disappeared with a quick "good-night," she had gone to play her last card in the game against Old Cormorant and the triumph for which he had labored.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FOUND AND LOST.

"You have come hither to quit the game forever—to die!"

It was Old Cormorant, as the reader will readily determine, who heard these words spoken by Isis Graham, Queen of the Cobra League, in the room to which she had lured him by the letter purporting to have come from Ninon Lispenard, so called.

He saw the mad look which accompanied the words, but whether the face was flushed or pale he could not tell, for the mask which effectually hid it.

He had found the woman whose avowed purpose was to put him out of the game; she had drawn him to her by a bit of deception which, under similar circumstances, would have hoodwinked the shrewdest.

"Very well," answered the detective. "If this is your game, you should make sure beforehand that you are capable of carrying it out."

The eyes behind the mask seemed to light up with derision.

"You cannot bluff the person who has entrapped you," exclaimed Isis. "You did not know you were to encounter me, therefore, you left no word with your pupil."

Old Cormorant felt the force of this reply. He had not told Louis about his venture. If he fell before the Queen of the Cobra, the young man would not know where to look for him.

"Why have you hunted me?" continued Isis, folding her arms.

"Why ask the question, if you intend to finish me?" said the Bowery Vidocq, with a grim smile. "You know why without any explanation from me."

"You are on the trail of what has been known as the Unknown Hand," she rejoined.

"I am no longer on that trail."

"Why not?"

"Because the trail has ended."

"How?"

"By the finding of the hand!"

At the same time the eyes of Old Cormorant became fixed on the white right hand of the creature before him.

A laugh stirred the center of the black mask. "If you are right," said the hidden lips, "the more reason for your death."

"That is true."

Isis walked to a chair, into which she dropped, and looked steadily at Old Cormorant for a moment.

"You have not forgotten the events that took place in Madam Medusa's house the night of the fire?" she went on.

"I remember them very well."

"You were seemingly overpowered by noxious gases which came from a place unknown to you."

"Go on."

"Well, you were rescued in the nick of time. In another minute you would have been past hope, and the trail would have lost you at the beginning. Now the rescuer is not on hand. The person who dragged you from the den of the fortune-teller will effect no more rescues. In other words, after betraying a friend to you, she left the game."

"I don't doubt it," replied the detective. "Captain Nantes is capable of doing anything."

Isis appeared to smile at mention of the Malay's name.

"You don't like Captain Nantes," said she.

"Why should I, seeing what he has been, and what he is to-day?"

Old Cormorant wondered if Isis knew that her fellow-conspirator had fallen before the dagger of the Indian girl.

"What is he to-day?" queried the woman, quickly.

The detective's time had come.

"What is he?" he replied. "A stiffened corpse in the dark!"

There was a quick start by the figure in the chair.

"Come! you cannot break the power that holds you in the thrall of doom!" exclaimed Isis. "You are playing a hand intended to unnerve me."

"Just as you think," smiled Old Cormorant. "Your rejection of my statement cannot make alive the dead."

His answer seemed to carry truth with every word.

"Who finished Captain Nantes, if he is dead? The girl?" asked Isis.

"You know who hunted him."

"The fanatic with the twisted blade—Deeje!"

"Then let us believe that Deeje found him."

"Where is he?"

"Dead in a hallway."

"But where?"

"Why must you know?" exclaimed Old Cormorant. "Do you want the body of the man who can no longer serve you—whose dagger kept time with yours in the state-rooms of the Voltican five years ago?"

In a moment the Queen of the Cobra was on her feet. Old Cormorant saw that her hands were clinched at her sides, that the nails were drawing blood from the palms.

He had sent another arrow home, and now he was looking at her with an air of triumph, as if he had lured her into his clutches instead of being himself a prisoner.

"We've had enough of this!" suddenly exclaimed Isis. "Who am I?"

"The Queen of the Coiled Cobra League!"

"No one else?"

"The owner of the Unknown Hand!"

A haughty toss of the head followed the shadow's last reply, and the next moment a quick stride carried Isis almost to his chair.

"Deeje has found Captain Nantes, has she?" she laughed. "Let it be so! The girl is the member of a mystic sect of trailers. She will next turn on me. I have had her in my employ, sleeping under the same roof with her, but not until lately seeing her in her true light. With you out of my way, Old Cormorant, as they call you, I can turn on the Indian tigress and crush her before she springs. I am familiar with the ways of these Indian women. I have lived among them. They have few secrets that I do not know. This one has consecrated her twisted dagger. Where? At the shrine of Neejar, the old priest of Vishnu! She has gone hence to kill, and, if your story is true, she has killed. Captain Nantes is the victim. Dead in the dark, ha!"

"Dead in the dark!" repeated the old detective.

All at once Isis fell back and placed her foot over a certain figure in the carpet.

"Will the pupil hunt when the master is gone?" she asked.

"Try him and see!"

Isis looked down at the floor.

"I have but to press the carpet with my foot," said she coolly returning her gaze to Old Cormorant's face. "This is an age of invention. You Americans, ever in search of something new, have discovered electric death, such as we knew nothing about in India. I have prepared for your coming. The death-button is beneath my foot; the current is ready. Captain Cormorant, the Queen of the Coiled Cobra is as powerful in America as she was in the realm of the Ganges."

The man of the Bowery stood like a statue before the cool creature who seemed to hold his life in her hands.

His thoughts worked like lightning-flashes.

"Let us separate!" suddenly continued Isis.

"I am the Unknown Hand. The lord of the mansion was one of the six traitors who turned their backs on the Cobra just when we were about to win the greatest triumph of the age. You have picked up link after link. You have gone to the bottom of the Lispenard Mystery. Further you cannot go. They will wind the death coil tighter about the son of the traitor; the woman he loves, instead of saving him, will send him to the trap! Isn't this a victory worth fighting for?"

The answer that greeted the woman's ears was the noise of a sudden leap toward her from the spot occupied by the man of the Bowery.

Isis fell back despite her firmness, for Old Cormorant came forward like a shaft let fly by a catapult.

She had put off the time of her triumph a second too long.

Words had ruined her!

Though she recoiled she did not get beyond the reach of Old Cormorant's hands.

She touched the wall, and he found her there.

"So you had your foot at the death-button, with the fatal battery beneath me?" he exclaimed.

She made no reply.

The clutch of the detective held her wrists as in a vise.

"You are right! My trail has ended!" he went on. "Do you think the coils will get tighter than they are now about the son and heir of Lot Lispenard, once a member of the Cobra League, and killed by the engraved dagger in your private desk because he turned traitor just before the bursting of the storm? If I release you, the twisted blade of the Indian girl, once your servant, will eventually find you. It would only be giving you a short lease of life to turn you loose. But we want you for a double crime, madam."

"A double crime?" repeated the unseen lips.

"Yes. The ruby missing from your bracelet is in my possession. It was found in the room where the Unknown Hand took the life of Madam Medusa, the seeress of Hester street. Shall I tell you why?"

Instead of recoiling the length of Old Cor-

morant's arms, Isis became as straight as an arrow.

"Don't repeat an old story," said she. "Madam Medusa deserved death."

"Not because she had betrayed any one, for she had not. She never saw India, therefore she could not have belonged to the Cobra. But the woman had eyes. She too was a passenger on the Voltican, and she may have seen the dagger-practice on board."

Teeth were heard to meet behind the mask.

"Let us go. The game is to be finished elsewhere," continued Old Cormorant.

His grip loosened just the slightest as he stepped back, and the following moment he went still further away—hurled from Isis by a strength that was startling.

The man of the Bowery recovered in an instant. He saw the Queen of the Indian League bound across the room; he sprung after her with the agility of a leopard; but a door opened in his face, and when it had closed the witch of secret crime had vanished!

Old Cormorant stood perplexed and deeply chagrined in the center of the room.

The Unknown Hand had been found and lost!

"Now she can't escape me long!" he exclaimed. "I have all the links of the chain. Captain Nantes can help her no more. The game is nearly out."

Yes, nearly out; but the terrible was yet to come; and that very soon.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAST LINK.

LISA, accidentally found by Deeje in the secret prison to which Captain Nantes had consigned her, hardly knew whither to betake herself after the rescue.

If she had known that the Indian girl had carried her over the corpse of the man whom she had once loved with all the fervency of passion, she would no longer have feared him and his traps.

She started at every shadow, fled from every sound, as it were, until she was the most wretched creature in New York.

In spite of Deeje's assertion that Isis of the League knew that she had been in the Malay's power, Lisa had no thought of betraying the Queen.

The French maid held the secret of the Unknown Hand. If she was Ninon's servant "Julie," she had admitted to the Lispenard mansion the mysterious one whose hand had taken life, and she (Lisa) knew that Lloyd was innocent.

An hour after Lisa's separation from Deeje, she found herself at the hallway which led to the detective's quarters on the Bowery.

The girl was pale and nervous. Her face, moreover, was white, and she looked like a person going to her doom as she crept up the stairs to the detective's room.

Something was taking her back to Old Cormorant.

Lisa opened the door softly—it was not locked—and stole into the room.

It was not quite dark, and she could see the furniture, and could discover that she was alone in the place.

The girl went to the table. She took Old Cormorant's favorite chair and leaned back among its cushions.

"He may come in shortly," murmured Lisa. "I'm safer here than on the street. They won't find me in this room. Yes, I'll wait awhile for him."

She closed her eyes and tried to think calmly. For many hours she had not slept. The excitement attending her situation in the old house had taken slumber from her eyelids, and the softness of the chair seemed to bring the drowsy god to her tired nature.

Twenty minutes had not passed before Lisa was sound asleep in Old Cormorant's chair, and while the Man of the Bowery faced Isis in the little house on Q—street, she slept like a child—the first refreshing sleep she had enjoyed for many hours.

At last the door opened.

The hour of midnight had come to the great city, and the slightest noise had a startling emphasis attached to it.

Lisa was suddenly awakened by a hand on her shoulder.

She started up and uttered a cry as a name greeted her ears.

"Julie?"

Old Cormorant stood at her side! The piercing eyes of the detective were gazing down upon her, and the name she had never heard him speak before seemed to send a thrill through her blood.

"Don't run away," continued Old Cormorant, smiling faintly. "In fact, I won't let you, Lisa. I've been looking for you. One other woman has just slipped through my hands, and I can't afford to let you serve me the same trick."

Lisa made no reply.

"You are Julie now," resumed Old Cormorant.

"No, I am not!" cried Lisa. "I have told you who I am. I am Lisa Dubarre!"

"Ninon calls you 'Julie.' You were 'Julie' to her.

Lisa appeared to smile.

"I know!" she cried, "you are going to try to make a traitress out of me. You can't do that, Captain Cormorant!"

"Why did you come here?"

"I hardly know."

"You don't want to tell me anything more about Captain Nantes, do you?"

"About that sleek villain who has given me a world of trouble?"

"Yes. You need not betray him now. It would be of no use."

"Why not?"

"The dead don't care, you know."

"He dead?"

"Yes!"

"Then, he is dead? I remember what the Indian girl said now. I see through her words."

"She found you, then?"

"She did. She found Captain Nantes also. I know it now. She is going after some one else. Deeje, Isis's maid, is an avenger. She calls herself the Child of the Twisted Dagger. She looks like a huntress, and I thank Heaven I haven't had her on my track."

Old Cormorant appeared to study the French girl closely a few seconds.

"I want the lost link, Lisa," said he.

"What lost link?" was the query.

"I want to know at what hour you admitted Isis of the League into the house of her victim."

Lisa looked strangely into the detective's face without reply.

Her lips seemed to meet with resoluteness; her look grew half-defiant.

"You don't want to betray her," Old Cormorant went on. "You took the most solemn oath of your life at that woman's bidding. She has charmed you as one of the beautiful but deadly serpents of India charms the bird. You helped her to her victim. You went into Ninon's employ in order to open the door for the Unknown Hand. You know when Isis came for Lispenard's life. You were then her oath-bound slave, just as you are still, fearing her while you believe her still attached to you. She has deserted you, Lisa."

"Prove it!"

"She knew that Captain Nantes had you somewhere in his power."

"Make that clear!" exclaimed Lisa, clutching the detective's arm.

"I can make another move," answered Old Cormorant coolly. "You were in the plot."

"In what plot?"

"The plot against Lot Lispenard, the millionaire."

"I was not!"

"Will the court believe you as against the proof I have collected?" smiled the Bowery Shadow. "With Ninon to recognize you as 'Julie,' with proofs that you were Madam Medusa's maid—at times her assistant in her charlatanisms; with the production of a letter signed 'Isis,' which you lost a short time prior to the two murders—with all this, I ask, will the court take your denial for gospel?"

Lisa showed the New York detective a face without color.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I am going to the end of the trail!" was the response. "I have just come from Isis. She has confessed. She has acknowledged that she is the Unknown Hand. I shall have the witch of the League before long. Do you want to share her fate, now that you have nothing to fear from Captain Nantes?"

"No! I want to quit this country. Death has broken the web."

"Deeje's dagger has given you liberty, but I hold your fate in my hands."

Lisa seemed to reflect, and Old Cormorant watched her with interest.

"When do you want the confession?" she asked.

"Now."

"In black and white?"

"Yes; but I will take good care of it."

The French maid shuddered.

A moment later the detective had taken writing materials from a drawer in the table and placed them before Lisa.

"You need not waste any words," said he, glancing at her. "Make it short and to the point."

Then he stepped back and appeared to busy himself with other matters, but all the time he covertly eyed her.

Lisa took up the pen, but hesitated. She dipped it into the ink, but let it get dry without touching it to the paper.

All at once Old Cormorant saw her lips meet, and the next instant she was at work.

For some time she wrote without pausing or looking up.

When she finished she threw the pen down, and pushed the paper across the table.

Old Cormorant picked it up and read it in silence.

"It will do—no words are wasted," he said with a slight nod.

There was no reply.

The detective put the confession away.

"If you have no couch for to-night, you will find one in there," said he, pointing to a door.

"I can find another if I need it," smiled Lisa.

"Are you sure of me now?"

"I'll risk that," was the reply. "You are in my hands. I have proof here," he touched his breast, "that you are 'Julie,' as well as Lisa. I'm going now. You don't have to quit the room."

She looked at him for a second as if she were about to speak; but she let him go away without a word, and she soon heard his footsteps on the stair.

"I've done it now," she exclaimed. "It was a solemn oath I took. I swore to serve her to the end without treachery. I even went so far as to invite death as a reward for treason. I have betrayed Isis to the bloodhound of the Bowery! I have given him the one missing link in the chain he has been following up. But he knew! He could have placed himself between me and a day or so of happiness yet to come. He had me in his grip. He knew I played the role of 'Julie.' If Isis were here I would offer myself to the avenging hand. I would—"

There came to the door at this moment a footstep that broke Lisa's sentence. She heard it distinctly on the floor beyond the threshold.

Fixing her eyes on the portal, she waited for it to open.

In a second she saw the door swing slowly toward her.

There came into the room with a gliding and noiseless motion, a figure that reminded the watchful girl of a pantheress.

Lisa stood beside Old Cormorant's chair like a person nailed to the planks under her feet.

The figure which had entered the room, came toward her.

"What! do I find you in his den?" suddenly cried the French girl's visitor. "No need to ask why you are here! You have broke the oath of secrecy! You have given the man of the trail what he calls the 'missing clew.' I did not expect to encounter you here; but I won't let the opportunity pass!"

A sudden bound on the speaker's part brought a hand in contact with Lisa's wrist. It closed in an instant, the fingers appearing to sink to the bone; and the next second the poor girl fell back with a horrified shriek from the Queen of the Cobra League!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE GULF OF RUIN.

LISA could not break away from the hand that gripped her wrist. She could recoil the length of Isis's arm, nothing more; and for a moment the Queen of the Coiled Cobra looked at her and laughed like a demon.

"Traitor!" cried Isis. "I find you on the very ground of your treachery! Captain Nantes did not suspect you soon enough. You have escaped from his trap—how, I will not ask; but you will never betray another mistress. No, my lady. When we part one of us will be here; but Old Cormorant won't call that person the right one when he comes back."

Poor Lisa was thrown against the wall as Isis spoke the last words. The room, which had many shadows before, suddenly grew darker still; there was a brief struggle against the chair-board, and then something fell to the floor and lay quiet.

Isis of the League looked at Lisa a moment in haughty triumph.

"She deserved it!" she exclaimed. "Once she saved the detective when we had him in our power, and once she betrayed me! That is enough! You'll find her here when you return, Old Cormorant, if you ever come back. Good-night, Lisa. Ha! ha! what would Deeje say if she knew this?"

Isis went down-stairs and out into the city.

She narrowly missed a young man who entered the detective's room within five minutes after her departure.

It was Louis.

The youthful shadow found Lisa where Isis had left her.

He struck a match and bent over her, uttering an exclamation when he saw the dark face and staring eyes.

The French maid was not dead.

Louis saw that she had been choked into insensibility, and it was not hard for him to believe that the hand which had done the deed had intended to take her life.

He set about at once to restore the girl to consciousness, and at last succeeded.

Lisa looked up into Louis's face with a strange smile; but not a word escaped her lips.

"Who did this?" queried Old Cormorant's pupil.

Lisa burst into a wild laugh.

"Out of her head!" ejaculated Louis.

The French girl continued to laugh until the detective turned away, out of pity, and retired across the room.

He waited for Old Cormorant, but the old shadower did not come.

At last Lisa fell asleep, and Louis watched her as the night wore on, bringing the light of another day nearer and nearer. He did not

quit the apartment until the morning was almost at hand. Lisa had fallen into a deep sleep, and thinking her good for an hour's solid slumber, the young detective locked the door and stole away.

He sought as rapidly as possible, a distant portion of the city where he rung a door-bell, and, after a brief delay, was admitted.

He waited a few minutes in a parlor when a young girl entered.

"I have found Lisa!" exclaimed Louis.

"I thank heaven!" answered the girl, who was Ninon. "We must hold her, for Old Cormorant's Lisa is the missing link. As Julia, she must tell all she knows. Where is she?"

"At the house on the Bowery."

"Will she remain there?"

"Until I return, at least. She is asleep and locked in."

Ninon was overjoyed.

She proposed to go at once to Lisa, running a risk of being found on the way by Clew and Trailer, from whom she was hiding, and after awhile the two went out.

Louis found the door of Old Cormorant's rooms not only unlocked, but wide open!

The lock had been broken, evidently by some one on the inside, and Ninon, who turned pale at the discovery, declared that Lisa had vanished.

A search confirmed Ninon's declaration. The only witness against Isis was gone!

For a moment Louis and his companion looked at one another, too surprised to exchange words.

"The girl is now lost forever!" finally exclaimed Ninon. "She won't give Old Cormorant another opportunity to pick her up. We have lost the witness to Lloyd's innocence, and if the Unknown Hand finds her, the last hope will vanish."

It was a dark picture that Ninon drew of the future; and Louis saw her shudder as she turned away to hide her real feelings.

"Come here! Heavens! look!" suddenly cried Ninon, who had gone to the window, and the detective saw her pointing down into the street while her breath came and went in gasps.

"Lisa is down there!" continued Ninon, grasping Louis's arm. "See how she looks up at the house!"

Louis hardly waited to hear the last sentence. He broke from Ninon's grip and ran from the room.

A few leaps carried him to the foot of the stairs. In another moment he was on the pavement.

He saw no one who resembled Lisa Dubarre. The place lately occupied by the person discovered by Ninon was vacant.

Louis looked everywhere, but the figure of the important witness did not greet his eye.

He went back to Ninon and reluctantly broke the results of his hunt.

"We are beaten!" exclaimed the girl. "Lisa has outwitted us. Old Cormorant must take the new trail. I shall go back to the hiding-place now. Send your master to me when you see him."

Ninon preferring to go back alone, Louis was left in the room.

He went at once to the secret niche in the wall, but found there no message from Old Cormorant.

In another minute he wrote a note, placed it in the niche, and was at the door of the room when he was confronted by a figure, the sight of which brought a cry of astonishment from his throat.

Ixion, the tattooer of New York, stood before him!

"I expected to find Old Cormorant, but I won't let you get away," cried Ixion. "I don't get away from my den often enough to get acquainted with the city. This came to me last night."

"This" was a bit of yellowish paper, which, when unfolded, was not larger than a man's hand. It was yellowish, and showed marks of age, and Louis looked at it curiously as Ixion opened it to his staring gaze.

He saw that it was partly covered with strange characters, which, from what he knew of such things, must be Hindustani writing.

From the paper he looked up inquisitively into Ixion's face.

"What does it say, Ixion?" he asked.

"Follow my finger," was the answer. "I'll read it word for word in the original; then I'll translate it." Which the tattooer proceeded to do, followed closely by the young detective, who could not conceal his excitement.

"Now for the English of it," said Ixion, glancing at Louis. "I—have—foiled—the—dogs! I—have—found—the—prey! The—twisted—dagger—is—at—last—in—the—sacred—sheath!"

"My God!" exclaimed Old Cormorant's pupil, falling back. "Who brought this to you—and why to you, Ixion?"

A grin displayed the tattooer's teeth.

"While you were in old Neejar's Temple you saw an Indian boy come out from the base of Vishnu's statue, did you not?" he inquired.

"I did! He was a naked boy, and as supple as a young acrobat!"

"Well, I am sure he brought the paper to

me," rejoined Ixion. "It was on my pillow when I awoke. It was wrapped in a different sort of paper, which had a line of Hindustani scrawled across it. The one line said, 'Vishnu will tell the rest if you will seek him.'"

"What do you understand by that?" queried Louis.

"The solution of the mystery is beneath old Neejar's roof."

"Why there?"

"I don't know."

"Did Deejeah pen the paper you have translated?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then, she has finished her work?"

"Yes."

"And we are baffled! Lisa has just escaped from me, and Old Cormorant fails!"

Ixion looked at the paper in his hand a moment, and Louis saw him shake his head doubtfully.

"Captain Cormorant has never failed!" said he. "I like the old sleuth-hound of New York. He must find the Unknown Hand before he can save Lloyd Lispenard."

"More than that! He must fasten the crime upon that hand!" cried Louis. "Isis, the Queen of the Cobra, is undoubtedly the guilty one; but, if Deejeah has found her, how can we prove it? But, heavens! I cannot think of this. So near and yet so far away! If Captain Nantes had but turned on the Child of the Twisted Dagger and killed her, we would not be on the threshold of defeat now, with that accursed paper in your hands! The message which accompanied the one you hold, may be a decoy."

"No! I'll risk that," said Ixion. "Let us go to Neejar's."

"I've been there. I've felt the hand of the old Indian serpent at my throat; but I'm willing to go back again. You can't go thither too quick for me."

Louis and Ixion hurried from the room, and took the shortest route to the street of the temple.

That part of the city was barely astir.

The tattooer applied his knuckles to the front door, and Louis waited for a response with bated breath.

Again and again he rapped; but there was no reply. Louis grew restless.

"Wait!" said Ixion with a grin.

He caught the knob and put one of his big shoulders against the door; then he pressed with all his weight, and fell half-way into the hall.

A moment later the two friends stood in the hallway, and Ixion was about to rush into the room of the idol, when the door opened in their faces, and a man came forth.

It was not Neejar the pagan priest, but Old Cormorant, the man of the Bowery!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE COBRA DEAD.

BOTH Louis and Ixion fell back in astonishment from before Old Cormorant, and the detective seemed as surprised as they.

"Where is she?" queried the man of the Bowery.

"Where is who?"

"Ah! you know nothing, then?" was the reply.

"We came here on the strength of this," said the tattooer, taking the piece of Hindoo writing from his pocket.

Leaning forward, he read it for Old Cormorant, at whose lips a faint smile appeared when the end was reached.

"I will show you the huntress. She is here," opening the door at his back.

The three men advanced into the ghostly room of the heathen altar. A poor light swinging midway between floor and ceiling, added to the weirdness of the place, and from amid the demi-gloom towered the grotesque form of Vishnu.

"Here she is!" continued the old detective, stooping at the foot of the statue and lifting a dark cloth which covered a figure with human outlines. "Behold the merciless traitor from the land of pagan rites and mysteries!"

Louis and the tattooer bent over the figure and looked at it a moment.

It was Deejeah.

There was no mistaking the dark face which they had seen so often.

The Indian girl lay on her back like a person arrayed for burial. Her hands had been crossed on her bosom, and she looked more like one asleep than dead.

While the two companions looked, Old Cormorant separated the hands.

"Heavens! the hilt of the Twisted Dagger!" cried Louis.

"Yes, the consecrated blade is in the heart of its owner" was the reply.

"Did Isis turn on Deejeah and strike her down?"

"I say not."

"Then, who did this deed?"

"The girl herself!"

"I see!" cried Louis. "This confirms the letter mysteriously conveyed to Ixion. Deejeah has finished her work. She found Isis of the League, and, having fulfilled her oath upon her, came hither and took her life at the feet of

Vishnu. This virtually ends our trail. It is defeat."

"Defeat, boy?" smiled the man of the Bowery.

"Yes, Lisa, who was in our hands for a time has vanished. Now her secret will be hers forever. With Isis dead and Lisa lost, what will get Lloyd out of the death toils?"

Old Cormorant restored the dark shroud to the corpse of the Indian girl before he spoke again.

"You see none but the dark side of the picture, Louis," he rejoined. "There is a brighter side. The robing of Deejeah for burial is old Neejar's work. The pagan priest has left his shrine forever. See! The abode of his slave and assistant, the Hindoo boy, is empty. There is nothing in the idol's lap. Everything indicates flight. We won't look for Neejar. Let the old fellow go. We must find Isis—Isis of the Cobra League!"

Five minutes later the three left the house together, and silence and darkness kept vigil over the corpse of the Avenger of India.

Not long afterward a little man, whose dark eyes had an eager sparkle, mounted the broad steps of a certain house in a fashionable part of the city.

He was not alone.

Of the two men who accompanied him, one was young, and the other was middle-aged, with an unusually large head on his shoulders.

The small man did not ring for admission, but unlocked the front door with a key which he had brought along.

In a moment they stood beyond the door. Light streaming in through the transom overhead, showed them the corridor and its elegant stairway.

The little man led the way. He opened a door at his right, closely followed by his companions.

They entered a magnificent parlor. It was almost dark.

Suddenly the leader of the party sprang forward. He caught the folds of a heavy curtain and threw them back.

There was a cry of terror, and the others saw the little man holding a woman with a vise-like grip at her wrist.

It was Lisa!

"In God's name! how did you know I had come to this house?" exclaimed the girl, staring first into her captor's face and then looking at his companions.

"It is my profession to hunt people. You forget this, Lisa," was the response.

"And you have found me!"

"It seems so."

For a moment the French maid remained silent.

"You are just in time," she said when she spoke again.

"In time for what?" repeated Old Cormorant.

"In time to close in on Isis this side of eternity."

"Where is she?"

"In her chamber."

"Up-stairs?"

"Up-stairs."

"Show us the way, Lisa."

The detective's last words were in the nature of a command.

Lisa Dubarre conducted the three men from the curtained-room to the staircase in the hall. She led the way up the carpeted-steps, and halted at a door on the floor above.

Old Cormorant went forward.

There was no disguising the meaning of the light that gleamed in his eyes. Deejeah, the human cyclone of blood, was dead; but her last victim was still alive, and within reach of his hand!

The man of the Bowery opened the door with an eagerness which he could not conceal.

He crossed the threshold of a small room—a lady's boudoir, furnished with Oriental splendor—and at a glance seemed to see the whole interior.

He was greeted by an exclamation which came from the corner of the room where stood a curtained couch.

A quick stride took Old Cormorant to the spot.

"I've been waiting for you," continued the same voice, and a woman's hand parted the rich hangings and showed him the face of Isis of the Indian League. "I felt that you would arrive before the end came. Who have you here? Ah! my old acquaintance, Ixion, the tattooer, and the young fox, your pupil! And Lisa, too! Did the girl show you the way?"

"I could not help it," said Lisa.

"Never mind, girl. I wanted to see him," and Isis looked at Old Cormorant again. "The sworn tigress found me in spite of my watchfulness. She came upon me under my own roof with the noiselessness of a shadow. I was laying a snare for her, for between us it was war to the knife. I knew nothing of her presence until I heard her cry of triumph behind me, and then came a sharp twinge of pain and darkness!"

"She was gone when I came back to consciousness," Isis continued, after a few seconds of rest. "I crept up here to die. The avenger

of India has doubtless taken her accursed dagger to Vishnu to be blessed. She can go back now. Her mission is ended. She found Captain Nantes somewhere, and me here."

"She will never see India," said Old Cormorant.

"Ha! Why not?" cried Isis. "Neejar will send her back—"

"Neejar has deserted his temple. It is tenanted by the dead, and the dead is Deejeah."

"Dead by her own hand and the twisted dagger?"

"Yes."

"I have outwitted her!" laughed the Queen of the League. "She perished believing that she had fulfilled her oath; that the consecrated blade left me dead where it fell. She won't get into paradise now according to her mystic creed. Ha, ha! The temple will become Deejeah's funeral pyre if it is not watched. Neejar won't let the body of the Indian girl rest in American soil."

Isis ran one of her hands underneath the pillow.

"This is what you want," she continued, bringing to light a folded paper. "This is what you've looked for, Captain Cormorant. The Unknown Hand hands you the solution of the Lispenard Mystery in black and white. It is completed all to the signature which I have withheld until your coming, for I knew you would come. Roll the table to the bed, Lisa."

The French maid obeyed, and Isis of the Cobra League took pen and ink from a drawer.

Leaning from the couch, she calmly affixed her name to the bottom of the paper, which she pushed toward Old Cormorant with a smile of satisfaction.

"The chain is now complete!" she exclaimed.

"It remained for the hand of Queen Isis to furnish the last link. Ah! what a persistent trailer you are!" and the dark eyes, slowly quitting the man of the Bowery, were turned away.

The papers of the next day contained much that was strange and startling.

They said that the dying confession of Mrs. Isis Grahame of — Avenue, "the elegant English widow," had cleared up the famous Lispenard Mystery; that Lloyd's prison doors had already opened and let him out; that one Captain Nantes had been found dead in a certain old house; that the pagan temple presided over by old Neejar, an Indian priest, had been "mysteriously destroyed by fire with all of its contents;" and, finally, that the Unknown Hand, thanks to Old Cormorant, the shadow of the Bowery, was unknown no longer!

What if the publication of Isis's confession brought to light the dark and hidden part of Lot Lispenard's life? What if it made him out a member of the Coiled Cobra League, killed by the hand of its queen? What if it also made the banker out a traitor? It took his son and heir out of the shadow of the noose, and restored him to the beautiful girl whose love for him through thick and thin had not abated for a moment.

It came out that Isis had slain Madam Medusa, the seeress, because she had witnessed the knife practice on board the Voltican; and it was the resemblance between the two crimes which brought from Old Cormorant the prophecy that his trail and Louis's were destined to come together.

Isis was placed under arrest, but she was never called upon to face an earthly tribunal. The twisted dagger had done its work, and in due time it sent the Queen of the Cobra beyond the reach of man's vengeance.

Old Neejar was never heard of after the destruction of his temple. Some thought he had perished in the flames, but he had, more likely, fled the city—going back to India with a report of Deejeah's work.

Lisa was permitted to disappear.

Death had broken the web of the Malay spider, and Old Cormorant pitied the wronged and guilty girl enough to let her steal away from the scene of her acts and vanish forever from American eyes.

Clew and Trailer, the detectives who were determined to send Lloyd Lispenard to the gallows, and who nearly accomplished their designs, were completely beaten by Old Cormorant's success, and within a short time both left Gotham for other fields of intrigue.

Louis is still close to the Vidocq of the Bowery, and both he and Old Cormorant are occasional visitors to a certain house near the river, known as "the den of Ixion, the tattooer."

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
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